

Aye for AI, but some fear too



ACROSS THE AISLE
BY P CHIDAMBARAM

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) is here. It is true that AI will multiply manifold human capabilities and productivity. India has a huge and growing wealth of human resources (at least until 2050). However, its quality is significantly different from the human resources of developed countries. In a developed country, practically everyone is school-educated and a great proportion is college-educated. There is an opportunity for life-long learning and acquiring new skills. In India, the demographic dividend comes with demographic burdens. While school enrolment at primary level is very high, there is a decline, at every stage, in enrolment at upper primary, secondary and higher secondary levels. Gross Enrolment Ratio in higher education is between 45-50%. Most college-enrolled students acquire an undergraduate degree that does not make them 'skilled' or 'employable' — the main reason why it is an onerous task for young men and women to find suitable jobs.

'F' for future, also fear

I have read a summary of Mr Darro

Amodi's (CEO, Anthropic) copyrighted 38-page essay 'The Adolescence of Technology'. On economic disruption, he says that AI could disrupt labour markets at 'unprecedented speed and across wide occupational categories, potentially displacing a significant portion of jobs, especially white-collar work in the near term'. It is scary. Another study in India found that AI recognises caste. If humans have taught caste-bias to AI, it is scarier.

Hon'ble prime minister is right that AI will open the doors to the future and fortune. But there is also fear that jobs will be lost. Routine and repetitive jobs such as ticket issuers and checkers, bus and train conductors, rail signal persons, traffic police officers, stenographers and typists, tourist guides, translators, lab technicians, bank tellers, private tutors, etc may vanish. Microsoft's CEO said that many tasks in white collar jobs will be automated. The company axed thousands of jobs in 2025. Tata Consultancy Services announced in 2025 that it would 'let go' of more than 12,000 employees as part of a restructuring exercise. Mr Vinod Khosla predicted that AI could eliminate IT services and BPO firms could almost disappear within the next five years.

India's biggest problem is lack of jobs. The current 'official' unemployment rate is 5.1 per cent, but we know it is more. Youth unemployment rate is 15 per cent. About 55 per cent of the employed 'are self-employed or in casual labour. In the prosperous regions, agriculture operations are already mechanised. Rural families disguise unemployment with the excuse that the young man or woman is 'self-employed'. If urban

If AI will do all our work, and bring prosperity to all, what will humans do? While the impact of AI unfolds during the next few years, it is time to ponder the question

blue-collar jobs too become scarce, and joblessness spreads to educated youth in 'skilled' sectors such as Information Technology and IT products/services, the situation will become explosive.

How ready is India and the world to tackle the inevitable challenges? As far as I gather, the world including India is not yet ready with solutions. The Chief Economic Adviser (CEA) drew a distinction between the impact of AI on advanced economies (*facing demographic decline, AI may be a plus*) and developing countries (*AI will be a stress test for state capacity*). Naturally, the solutions will be different. His solution is that "relentless execution could help India become the first large society...to align technological adoption with mass employability." I wish the solution was so simple.

Difficult measures

The early results of relentless adoption of technology are reduction in jobs, at least in Indian factories. But there is time, as the *Economist* says, between "invention and diffusion", and to take the hard measures that will absorb the impact of technological adoption. For example, given the vast numbers of job-seekers and jobs, India must be prepared to:

- Recognise that, unlike developed countries, India is required to create a variety of jobs for the youth who may drop out at upper primary, secondary or higher secondary levels of school;
- Separate, at the higher secondary level, the academic stream and the non-academic stream of students based on ap-

titude and merit;

- Close the numerous 'pass' courses in non-science subjects and channel the students to post-graduate education, STEM or skilling courses;
- Massively invest in education, health-care and environment management;
- Develop local/regional markets that will produce and consume quality goods and services supported by local or regional banks, and not be obsessed with Big business, Big markets, Big chains and Big banks;
- Acknowledge that, in the present day, MSMEs are the biggest job creators in India. If AI can help MSMEs — as promised by the Minister of Information Technology — MSMEs will be able to create more jobs. The CEA has noted that India needs to create "at least 80 lakh jobs every year." The required number will be more; and
- Require those who will adopt AI and, resultantly, destroy jobs, to create an equal number of jobs. We don't have to agree with Mr Jamie Dimon (CEO, JP Morgan Chase) and ban 'lay-offs'. Corporate Social Responsibility has infused a degree of social responsibility in businesses; that must include job-creating responsibility.

Dystopian Future

A world without jobs, or fewer jobs, will stare at a dystopian future. 'Work' defines a human. No other living creature works voluntarily except to hunt for food. If AI will do all our work, and bring prosperity to all, what will humans do? While the impact of AI unfolds during the next few years, it is time to ponder the question.

Artificial intelligence, real hubris



FIFTH COLUMN
BY TAVLEEN SINGH

IT HAPPENS that I watched the AI Impact Summit from a small seaside village in Maharashtra. This gave me a chance to view things from a different perspective. And time to experiment with the only AI I use. I asked ChatGPT to write a column on the summit in my writing style. It took less than a minute to write a piece that I could well have written. Here is a sample sentence. "The danger is not that we are talking about AI. The danger is that we may begin to believe our own rhetoric." Not bad at all.

It shames me not one bit to admit that ChatGPT pre-empted the piece that you are about to read. There is no question that Narendra Modi pulled off a spectacular success with his AI summit, but we need to be wary about getting too carried away by this. We in India have kind of missed the AI bus while our old enemy China has not only ridden on it but is, along with the United States, driving it. While we in our beloved motherland were busy unleashing a wave of Hindutva vigilantism, the Chinese were busy inventing their own version of AI at a much lower cost than the Americans. So, before we start pretending that we can become the voice of the Global South, we should pay attention to how China has already become that voice.

At the summit in Delhi there was much talk of how India can adjust new technologies to our own needs and offer them to the world at a much lower price. But the question we need to ask is, what has prevented us from already developing Indian versions of AI? Was it a lack of funds that stopped us from competing in this new world? Was it something else? It is to Modi's credit that he realised some time ago that India could not ignore this magnificent and dangerous new technology. In doing this he did better than prime ministers of yore who ignored such transformative technologies as computers, satellite TV and cellphones until they sneaked up on us and changed everything. The Congress Party should have kept this in mind before unleashing its protestors into the AI summit to cause disruption and embarrassment.

But ChatGPT spoke for me when it warned that we should not 'start believing our own rhetoric.' With all the promises of investment made at the summit we still have a very long way to travel on a road that has obstacles and mysteries around every corner. The experts tell us that AI can make an extraordinary difference in the fields of education and healthcare. This is certainly true but in vast tracts of India the basics do not exist for this to happen. AI uses more electricity than other technologies so how will things work out in rural India where electricity is unreliable at best and unavailable at worst?

The experts tell us that schoolchildren will be able to use AI for tuitions when teachers are absent. In the village where I am writing this piece there is a government school in which no computer has ever found its way. The schoolhouse is a tumbledown old cottage whose roof leaks when the rains come. There are two teachers who are responsible for teaching every subject from science and mathematics to literature and social studies. The village has a private school that is better. But the level of teaching is so low that children leave school barely able to read and count. In the thirty years that I have come to this village I have seen no improvement in the schools.

If somebody gets sick in the village they must go to the nearest small town to find a doctor. Serious health problems require going to Mumbai which is more than a hundred kilometers away. Water in the village is hard to find and electricity is whimsical. If conditions are like this in rural Maharashtra just think what things are like in rural parts of Bihar or Uttar Pradesh. I have visited schools in these states in which children sit on bare, mud floors and come to school only for the midday meal. At the risk of repeating what I have said often in this column: Modi's biggest failure has been that he has not ordered his chief ministers to concentrate on rectifying those fundamental flaws in the model of governance that they inherited from decades of Congress rule.

If AI can do what humans have failed to, then we need to embrace it with open arms and ensure that it spreads rapidly across rural India where it is needed more than in the cities. But before that happens, we need to build the infrastructure it requires to be able to make a difference. So, it is terrific that the Prime Minister managed to organise such a successful AI Impact summit and in doing so make clear that India is open for business. Now what he needs to do is whip his chief ministers into doing what they should have been doing for the past decade. Sad to say they have mostly wasted their time on things of no consequence and on enjoying the fruits of power.

To quote again from that sentence written by my new best friend ChatGPT, we are already in danger of 'believing our own rhetoric.'

In Bangladesh, strains from the past shape its present



INSIDE TRACK | BY COOMI KAPOOR

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

The publication of the banquet menu at Rashtrapati Bhavan for the President of Seychelles has triggered a debate as to whether it is appropriate for the Indian government to serve distinguished foreign visitors fanciful but sparse vegetarian fare only. Confirming a senior journalist's claim that visiting dignitaries routinely return from banquets at Rashtrapati Bhavan and Hyderabad House and order food at their hotels, Mahua Moitra claimed that French President Emmanuel Macron requested bread, cheese and cold cuts in his room after a G20 summit banquet highlighting millets (*bajra*). Should good hosts impose their dietary fancies on their guests? And is it smart diplomacy to send our foreign guests home on an empty stomach? Those accustomed to hearty meals of roasts, steaks, pies, and a succession of succulent dishes find the airy-fairy, nouvelle cuisine vegetarian fare served of late at our official banquets hard to swallow. (Even vegetarians complain of the unfamiliar dishes.) At the Seychelles president's dinner, the main course was simply potatoes cooked Gujarati style, roasted brinjals, spiced paneer and mushrooms. Descriptions of pickles were included in the menu card to disguise the paucity of dishes. The menu writer waxed even more eloquent for the AI Summit dinner hosted by the PM last week, where the main course of *rajma*, *chawal* and *bajra* was described in lyrical language!

The late foreign correspondent M V Kamath had traced Richard Nixon's animosity towards India to an indifferent vegetarian meal hosted by Morarji Desai when Desai was finance minister and Nixon out of power. Nixon was to compare the spartan Indian meal most unfavourably with the lavish spreads laid out for him in Pakistan. It is pertinent to point out that normally foreign governments courteously offer vegetarian options for Indian guests, but also keep the tastes of other diners in mind. As the old proverb goes, the way to a man's heart is through his stomach.

WRESTLING DEBATE

When Rahul Gandhi began his Lok Sabha speech on the Budget, the faces of senior Congress leaders reflected their anxiety. Instead of taking up the topic at hand, Gandhi began with a discourse on the martial arts. Congress MPs were relieved to discover that their unorthodox leader was explaining about jiu-jitsu grips, chokes, taps and surrender as an analogy to the alleged stranglehold of the US government over Prime Minister Modi. Gandhi does not hide his love for the martial arts. In January, at a closed door training camp in Kurukshetra, Haryana, Gandhi, wearing traditional judo gear, was accompanied by his professional instructor. Both exhibited some agile manoeuvres for the stunned audience of district Congress committee chiefs and party functionaries. Gandhi explained that in politics, if the opponent tries to overpower and pin them down, they should tactfully keep rolling out without allowing the enemy to overpower them. His message was that those who master martial arts emerge stronger in politics. Last year, Rahul informed a senior leader that he was planning martial arts camps for teenagers in major cities. Some party leaders view the proposal as a smart move to galvanise youth and counter RSS training camps. But sceptics question whether politics and jiu-jitsu are in fact an ideal match.

MYSTERIOUS SUPPORT

Assam CM Himanta Biswa Sarma was pulled up by the BJP high command for the AI generated video on X showing Sarma targeting Muslims. As damage control, the Assam BJP media co-convenor was sacked and the party chief spokesperson in Delhi disowned the post. The central leadership's rebuke of one of its favourite CMs was more about electoral concerns than ethics. BJP election strategists apprehended that the offending video could result in the state's approximately 36% Muslims uniting in backing the Congress to defeat the BJP. Interestingly, post the video, four teams of maulanahs have visited Muslim dominated areas in Assam. Their theme is that if Asaduddin Owaisi could successfully mobilise minority votes in Maharashtra and Bihar, an Assamese Muslim leader could do the same in the state. Their message suggested that minorities should vote for Badruddin Ajmal, a Muslim businessman-politician accused of splitting the Muslim vote. Ajmal, however, while thanking the campaign teams for their efforts, claims he has no clue where his supporters originated.

STARENVOY

He may be the newest arrival to New Delhi's diplomatic corps, but the special treatment accorded to US ambassador Sergio Gor is marked. Gor hosted a party after his first month in India which was attended by both External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar and Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal. Gor attended the US-India T20 cricket match as chief guest of ICC chairman Jay Shah and was escorted by RIL head Mukesh Ambani and wife Nita. His visit to the Army's western command headquarters was widely reported and the presence of the accompanying US admiral was a mere aside.



HISTORY HEADLINE
BY SUMIT GANGULY

THE BANGLADESH Nationalist Party (BNP) has won a clear-cut victory, securing 212 of the 299 parliamentary seats. Tarique Rahman, the son of former BNP leader and Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, who was in exile since 2008 is now officially the PM. However, the BNP's principal opposition, the Awami League, was not allowed to participate in the polls.

Several questions immediately come to mind. How will the BNP govern the country, riven by political turmoil since the ouster of Sheikh Hasina? How are relations with India, its principal neighbour, likely to evolve? How will Dhaka handle its recently strengthened ties with Pakistan? Will it continue to maintain warm relations with the People's Republic of China? It is too early to offer definitive answers to these questions. It is, however, possible to make some tentative, educated guesses about the likely policy directions and choices of this nascent government.

Proffering initial answers requires delving into the history and evolution of the BNP since its inception in 1978 under General Ziaur Rahman. Zia, of course, had come to power in 1977 following the sanguinary aftermath of the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on August 15, 1975. Zia, while ruthlessly suppressing opposition and surviving multiple assassination attempts, held a largely free and fair election in 1979, in which his newly formed party won a parliamentary majority. His tenure in office, however, proved to be short-lived. Amid the country's tumultuous politics, he too was assassinated in 1981 during another successful military coup. This coup brought General Hussain Muhammad Ershad to office.

During General Zia's tenure, the country shed some of its secular orientation. In an ironic twist, given that Zia had



During General Zia's (left) tenure, the country moved away, to some extent, from the secular framework established by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. WIKIPEDIA

fought for the country's liberation in 1971, he sought to improve relations with Pakistan. Quite unsurprisingly, these moves did not endear him or his regime to New Delhi. A decade later, his widow, Khaleda Zia, assumed power as military rule in Bangladesh came to a close.

In the interim, especially under General Ershad, Bangladesh had increasingly moved away from its original secular foundations. Instead, religion was progressively enshrined in the country's politics, with Islam being declared the state religion in 1988. It was hardly surprising that Begum Zia, upon assuming office, continued this drift. Indeed, her embrace of Islam in the country's politics reflected a deep underlying tension in the country's identity and political culture: the contradictory currents of linguistic and religious nationalism, a strain that continues to cleave the country.

Given that the country's politics are riven along these lines and given the right-of-centre orientation of the BNP, it will bear watching how it proceeds to deal with the country's steadily dwindling minority Hindu population, which has declined from about 12 per cent in 1981 to around 8 per cent today. Even though the BNP, with a firm majority in parliament, is not dependent on Jamaat-e-Islami, it will nevertheless be inclined to nod towards the growing religiosity that has come to characterise the country's politics in recent decades.

How it negotiates these shoals will, inevitably, affect its relations with New Delhi.



Additionally, given its historic pro-Pakistan orientation, its diplomatic overtures towards Islamabad will be of interest to India. Already, under the interim government of Muhammad Yunus, Bangladesh had, among other measures, granted preferential access to its ports to Pakistan and strengthened defence ties. Given the BNP's ideological leanings and its long-standing scepticism of India, the outreach towards Islamabad may continue under the new political dispensation.

Finally, even before the ouster of Sheikh Hasina, China had made diplomatic and military inroads into Bangladesh. It is all but certain that the new government will do little to stem those trends, especially as it can utilise that relationship to reduce its dependence on India for trade and investment. In effect, the BNP's win will, in all likelihood, accelerate several currents that have come to characterise Bangladesh's domestic and foreign policies in recent years, especially under Yunus's interim government. Under these circumstances, policymakers in New Delhi will face significant challenges. Addressing them and managing bilateral ties will require skill, patience and imagination. Even as Bangladesh's election is worthy of celebration, several fraught issues loom on the horizon, both in terms of its domestic and foreign policy.

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When the joke's on you



ON THE LOOSE
BY LEHER KALA

IN A suit filed in the Delhi High Court, yoga guru Ramdev has objected to posts on Facebook and X that use his persona as a source of amusement and parody for comic relief to "generate audience engagement". Citing "personality rights", his counsel argued against "misleading and denigrating content" while X's legal team contended that political commentary, satire and public opinion must be protected. Noting that it's an impossible task removing everything someone famous finds insulting, the HC held firm that "we can't be so sensitive". And, that it was perfectly alright to fact check fake news on Baba Ramdev, as someone had done. Ramdev's net worth is around Rs 1600 crore, derived mainly from his wellness business Patanjali Ayurved which is now a major FMCG entity.

Whatever Ramdev is or isn't, it's impossible not to have a grudging sort of admiration for someone who's made his fortune parading around unselfconsciously in an orange loincloth, proudly displaying his hirsute

body, while holding forth on everything from corruption to entrepreneurship. His grand claims of miraculous cures have been discredited as appalling nonsense but he has got away virtually consequence-free because a gullible public bought into "Coronil", Patanjali's magic potion to cure Covid. In one video on YouTube that's been viewed a few lakh times, two comedians are having a field day replaying Ramdev's contempt for the Covid vaccine while peddling his own concoctions instead. Since then, Patanjali has been pulled up by the Supreme Court — they had to issue an unconditional apology for deceitful practices, a Delhi court restrained them from terming other companies' Chyawanprash as "dhoka", and, they've been fined for selling substandard ghee.

None of this seems to have affected Patanjali's bottomline or diminished the Guru's cult-like status. Considering so many serious misdeeds, a lesser mortal would prefer to slink into the background to safeguard the crores he's already accumulated,

but not Ramdev, who's marching valiantly ahead, undeterred, busy filing complaints against people making jokes about him.

It turns out no one's too rich or too successful to take offence; and it's one of the few pitfalls of the limelight that one must grin and bear other peoples' unflattering opinions, which they tend to pronounce on the Internet with delighted glee. Those wondering why Ramdev would care that inconsequential jokesters are poking fun at him don't get the psychology of stardom. From being a nobody to becoming a household name is some journey in one lifetime, and anyone even slightly self-reflective will have moments of disbelief, a ka the Imposter Syndrome. Could this rockstar really be me? By virtue of luck more than strategy, the myth of Ramdev soared with the symbolic revival of the greatness of ancient India. At this particular moment in history, when popular opinion is a force of such unprecedented power, Ramdev was recast as the gatekeeper of tradition, especially yoga. After so much

fering and accolades, it's unpleasant to be objectively evaluated, and discover that one's own embellished narrative is making a smattering of people at least squeal with laughter. All the money in the world can't make up for the fact that the very insecurities we strive so hard to hide are so cringingly visible and a cause of cheer to others. One imagines though, a yogi is made of sterner stuff; the rest of us by force of circumstance have imbibed the wisdom that what other people think of you is none of your business. But whether you're Ramdev or a random person, it's always a gut punch to discover that everyone doesn't view you in the same dreamy, soft light you imagine they do. That, at some point, we all fall short of the expectations of others, is one of the many disillusionments of being alive, besides the more humbling reality, that fame may enshrine a chosen few in a halo of otherworldliness but that too, is unlikely to last.

The writer is director, Hutkay Films

FAQ

Why has eastern Nagaland got autonomy?

What does the Frontier Nagaland Territorial Authority offer to six 'backward' districts of the State?

Rahul Karmakar

The story so far:

On February 5, the Centre signed a tripartite agreement with the Nagaland Government and the Eastern Nagaland Peoples' Organisation (ENPO) to form the Frontier Nagaland Territorial Authority (FNNTA). An experiment in "devolutionary autonomy", the FNNTA offers a high degree of administration and financial autonomy to six "backward" eastern districts – Kiphire, Longleng, Mon, Noklak, Shamator, and Tuensang.

What was the ENPO's demand?

The core demand of the ENPO was the creation of a separate State to be carved out of Nagaland. Its demand for a 'Frontier Nagaland' was conveyed in 2010 through a memorandum to the Centre, but is rooted in the policy of the pre-1947 British administration to leave the hills as an un-administered frontier. This lack of governance created a "developmental differential" that postcolonial India struggled to bridge. The eight Naga tribes inhabiting the six eastern districts increasingly began feeling ignored, politically and economically, after

A central feature of the agreement is the establishment of a mini-Secretariat within the region, to bring state machinery to the doorsteps of the eastern tribes

Nagaland was carved out of Assam as a State in 1963. The resentment snowballed into a movement for independence

from the alleged administrative dominance of the western Naga tribes.

Why did Centre find merit in the demand?

The Centre's decision to intervene was driven by a mix of strategic compulsion and political obligation. New Delhi and Kohima, Nagaland's power centre, attempted to satisfy the ENPO with SOPs, including a ₹500-crore package, but these solutions failed to address the underlying political aspirations of the people. In 2024, the situation reached a breaking point when the ENPO leaders called for a total boycott of the Lok Sabha elections, demonstrating their immense collective leverage. That the ENPO region is a critical buffer zone bordering Myanmar also played a role in the Centre's eagerness to resolve the issue. Leaving a large segment of Nagaland's population disillusioned in such a region was a major security risk, especially as armed extremist groups are based across the porous border.

The FNNTA is seen as a pacifier for a strategic asset to ensure that the frontier remains stable and aligned with national interests.

What does the FNNTA offer?

The FNNTA offers semi-autonomous governance to six eastern Nagaland districts. A central feature of the agreement is the establishment of a mini-Secretariat within the region, headed by a high-ranking officer to bring state machinery to the doorsteps of the eastern tribes, reducing their dependence on Kohima. According to the blueprint, development outlays will be shared proportionally based on population and area, and the Ministry of Home Affairs has committed to providing initial expenditure for the authority's establishment. The FNNTA will exercise legislative and executive powers over 46 specific subjects. This devolution allows local leaders to make decisions on land use, agriculture, rural development, and infrastructure tailored to the specific needs of their tribes. Crucially, the agreement achieves this without abrogating or altering Article 371(A) of the Constitution, thereby preserving the unique customary laws and social practices central to the Naga identity.

Can the FNNTA model be leveraged to resolve the Kuki-Zo demand?

The FNNTA model has raised questions about its applicability to the Kuki-Zo demand for a Union Territory-like separate administration in conflict-scarred Manipur. Structurally, the FNNTA is similar to the Hill Areas Committee mechanism under Article 371(C) in Manipur, which was provided to protect tribal interests. The Nagaland model suggests that the Centre is willing to create "territorial authorities" as a middle path between total Statehood and standard district administration. This may provide a solution for the Kuki-Zo community, as it demonstrates that New Delhi can innovate constitutionally to grant autonomy without redrawing State maps. However, the differences in context are stark. In Nagaland, Chief Minister Neiphiu Rio was a willing partner in the negotiations, and there was no active, violent conflict between the Nagas. In Manipur, the government based in the Meitei-dominated Imphal Valley remains vehemently opposed to any administrative separation, and the levels of inter-group trust are currently non-existent. Furthermore, the presence of other groups, especially the Tangkhul Naga-heavy National Socialist Council of Nagalim, who also claim parts of the hill districts, makes a clean administrative carve-out much more difficult.

What are the key takeaways from AI summit?

What does the New Delhi Declaration say? How many countries are signatories? What were the goals? What is the aim of the Global AI Impact Commons? Apart from Reliance and the Adani Group, which companies have announced investments in domestic AI?

Aroon Deep

The story so far:

The AI Impact Summit from February 16-20 attracted lakhs of visitors, with high-profile AI executives and heads of state visiting New Delhi. On Saturday, 88 countries and international organisations signed the New Delhi Declaration on AI, which stresses that the technology must be democratised to make a difference.

Since when are AI summits being held?

Since 2023, dozens of countries have participated in annual gatherings to discuss AI. In its first instalment in Bletchley Park, the U.K. hosted a small dialogue on safety, where India was represented by then Minister of State for Electronics and Information Technology Rajeev Chandrasekhar. There is no international organisation that convenes these gatherings as of now – participating countries have generally passed on the baton for the following year's summit. 2024's edition was held in Seoul, and the last AI Action Summit was held in Paris in February 2025, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi co-chairing the edition with President Emmanuel Macron. In the Paris summit, the multilateral AI dialogue saw a significant shift, with U.S. Vice-President J.D. Vance vocally rejecting a safety-first approach, instead emphasising innovation and unrestrained investment into frontier research and commercialisation of the technology.

What were the India-hosted summit's goals?

For India's turn, the government advanced a key set of priorities: that AI's capabilities must be available to as many people as possible; more work must be done to make it relevant in the

The summit is expected to catalyse long-term international partnerships

Global South, such as by expanding representation for languages that have been under-represented in the training of western LLMs (large language models); and that the technology should be "safe and trusted". On the domestic front, the government sought to project India as an attractive destination for AI infrastructure and research, drum up investor sentiment for putting money into AI, and for encouraging the technology's already-enthusiastic adoption in India, especially in fields such as healthcare, agriculture and education. The names of the working groups convened for this purpose reflect some of these priorities: human capital, inclusion for social empowerment, safe and trusted AI, resilience, innovation, and efficiency, science, democratising AI resources, and AI for economic development and social good.

What were the outcomes of the summit?

The government says that the summit attracted over five lakh visitors, a record that easily surpassed the attendance of the G20 summit in 2023. The government also touted \$250 billion in investment commitments, as well as \$20 billion in commitments for frontier deep tech research. The event also hosted over 500 individual discussions, with speakers from around the world. During the summit, India joined the U.S.-led Pax Silica initiative, which seeks to build a network of like-minded countries opposed to concentration of power in electronics manufacturing and critical minerals. India also achieved broad consensus among 88 countries and international organisations for the New Delhi Declaration on AI, which was signed by the U.S., China, France, and several other countries who are key for the development and deployment of AI at present.

The event saw the long-anticipated launch of India's first domestically trained multi-billion parameter LLMs by Sarvam AI. Sarvam is a Bengaluru-based firm that enjoys millions of dollars in private equity investment as well as government support in subsidised access to computing resources under the IndiaAI Mission. The firm says its models are efficient, and beat comparable models at many benchmarks. It has announced that its models will be open source, and after the summit, launched a chatbot interface in beta to interact with its LLMs.

The event was also plagued by a series of setbacks almost every day. On the opening day – three days before the plenary with the heads of state and keynotes by figures like OpenAI CEO Sam Altman and Google CEO Sundar Pichai – organisers were overwhelmed by an unexpected number of participants. Security and logistics

issues abounded, with significant traffic snarls delaying even some speakers from making it to their discussions. On the second day, an exhibitor at the summit's concurrent expo, Galgotias University, passed off a Chinese-made robot as their students' creation. The wide publicity to this caused significant embarrassment to the organisers, who ordered the university to vacate the premises. And on Friday, a group of Indian Youth Congress members stormed the expo, revealing hidden T-shirts and chanting, "Modi is Compromised," before being apprehended by the police. The Delhi Police has apprehended the protesters, and is investigating the protest.

What were the investment commitments?

Reliance Industries Ltd. announced commitments of ₹10 lakh crore in domestic AI, only slightly more than the Adani Group's similar commitment. Google gave a few fresh details about its existing \$15 billion investment in data centre and AI projects in India, such as a subsea cable system that would directly connect India and the U.S. The event also saw high-profile pacts between OpenAI and the Tata Group, along with another agreement between Anthropic and Infosys. OpenAI said it would lease 100 megawatts of data centre capacity from Tata's HyperVault, and provide its advanced models to the firm's employees. The pacts were notable due to the stock price damage that both firms took after Anthropic's latest coding LLM shocked investors with its advanced capabilities. Yotta Data Services, a domestic data centre operator, announced \$2 billion in data centre infrastructure build-out, with graphics processing units from Nvidia.

What does the New Delhi Declaration say?

The declaration is broadly in line with India's stated multilateral priorities when organising the summit. Nearly all commitments are described in the statement as "voluntary" and "non-binding," encouraging wider participation. These include a charter for the "democratic diffusion" of AI; a "Global AI Impact Commons," which would serve as a database of use cases for countries to draw inspiration from; a "Trusted AI Commons," described as a "repository of tools, benchmarks, and best practices [that supports the] development of secure and trustworthy AI systems"; an "International Network of AI for Science Institutions" which would link technical institutes around the world; an "AI for Social Empowerment Platform"; an "AI Workforce Development Playbook and Reskilling Principles," and "Guiding Principles on Resilient and Efficient AI." "The summit is expected to catalyse long-term international partnerships and position AI as a key driver of economic growth," the government said in a statement, adding that there was "broad-based global consensus on leveraging AI for economic growth and social good".



New route: PM Modi poses with Google CEO Sundar Pichai, OpenAI CEO Sam Altman, and other leaders at the AI summit, in Delhi on February 19. REUTERS

Why has NGT cleared the Nicobar project?

Why does the government insist that the project is of strategic importance? What will India achieve by establishing a major cargo transshipment hub? What will happen to the biodiversity of the Great Nicobar Island? What are the concerns? Can coral colonies be translocated?

Jacob Koshy

The story so far:

The National Green Tribunal (NGT) recently concluded a high-stakes legal battle over the 'Holistic Development of Great Nicobar Island', and ruled that all environment safeguards are in place for the Great Nicobar Island Project. This integrated project, estimated to cost ₹80,000-90,000 crore, has been at the centre of a debate between national interests and the preservation of one of the world's most sensitive ecosystems.

What is the Great Nicobar project?

The project is an integrated infrastructure development plan proposed by the Andaman and Nicobar Islands Integrated Development Corporation Limited (ANIIDCO). It consists of four major components: an International Container Transshipment Terminal (ICTT), a 450 MVA gas and solar-based power plant, a large-scale township and area development, and an international airport. Building all of this would require diverting 130.75 square kilometres of forest land – roughly 18% of the total area of the Great Nicobar Island. It is projected to generate over 1.28 lakh jobs by the time it is fully implemented in 2052. However, the inevitable environmental impact of this project has

The island is a biodiversity hotspot, and the project faces several ecological challenges

prompted global outrage.

What is the history of the project?

The project's regulatory journey began in May 2021 with a Stage-I forest clearance granted in October 2022, followed by environmental and Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) clearances on November 11, 2022. These clearances were challenged in a "first round" of litigation in 2022. On April 3, 2023, the NGT found "unanswered deficiencies" regarding coral conservation, the adequacy of environmental data, and zoning violations. The tribunal then formed a High-Powered Committee (HPC) to revisit these issues. The final order issued this month is the result of the "second round" of litigation, where the tribunal reviewed the HPC's findings and the government's subsequent actions.

Why is it a 'national necessity'?

The government maintains that the project is of extraordinary strategic, defence, and national importance. The Great Nicobar is located just 40 km from the Malacca Strait, a critical international shipping lane. The area is seen as a vital location to counter the "growing presence" of foreign powers in the Indian Ocean. By establishing a major cargo transshipment hub, India can participate more fully in the global maritime economy and save significant costs on cargo that is currently transhipped through foreign ports. A permanent, robust presence on the island is expected to curb the poaching of marine resources by foreign entities.

What about Nicobar's ecology?

The island is a biodiversity hotspot, and the project faces several ecological challenges. Initial surveys identified 20,668 coral colonies in the vicinity. While Island CRZ regulations prohibit the "destruction of corals", the project involves the translocation of 16,150 colonies to suitable recipient sites. The island is home to the Leatherback Sea Turtle, the Nicobar Megapode, and the Saltwater Crocodile. Critics argued that the construction would destroy nesting grounds in Galathea Bay. A major point of contention was whether the port layout overlapped with Island CRZ-IA areas, which are the most ecologically

sensitive zones (like mangroves and sand dunes) where heavy construction is strictly prohibited. Environmentalists argued that the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) was based on only one season of baseline data, which they claimed was insufficient for a project of this magnitude. Critics have also raised concerns that the environmental impact studies downplay the seismic risks of the region, which is located in a high-activity tectonic zone.

How will it affect the tribal populations?

The island is inhabited by the Shompen and Nicobari tribes. The NGT noted the following regarding tribal rights – the Expert Appraisal Committee (EAC), which advises the Centre on environmental clearances, found that the project is designed not to disturb or displace any tribal habitation. The tribunal stated that the habitat rights of the tribes would be protected under the Forest Rights Act, though as recently as last month some of the leaders of the tribal council said that they were being "coerced" to sign 'surrender' certificates noting that they have no objection to their lands being given to the government. ANIIDCO is required to provide funds to the A&N Tribal Welfare Department for the welfare and protection of the tribal groups.

What was the NGT's reasoning?

The tribunal ultimately upheld the environmental clearance, adopting a "balanced approach" that weighed environmental safeguards against national security. The NGT ruled that while EIA procedures are mandatory, they should not be used to adopt a "hyper-technical approach" that ignores ground realities and national security. It accepted the Zoological Survey of India's (ZSI) finding that no "major" coral reef exists in the direct work area of Galathea Bay, only "scattered" colonies. It ruled that translocation would effectively protect the colonies. Following a site visit by the National Centre for Sustainable Coastal Management (NCSM), the tribunal accepted that no part of the port project fell within the prohibited ICRZ-IA zone. The tribunal also ruled that one-season data was sufficient because the islands are not classified as a "high erosion" stretch where multi-season data is mandatory.

With the NGT according legal clearance, the ANIIDCO can move ahead with project development. The Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways is also expected to move on port development activities.



Ecological importance: A view of the Great Nicobar Biosphere reserve.

PROFILES

Champion of European autonomy

Emmanuel Macron

France's centrist President has been pushing for reducing Europe's reliance on the U.S. and building military and strategic autonomy, but faces policy resistance abroad and political instability at home

Ioan Sony Cherian

In 1962, French President Charles de Gaulle declared that "Europe must be organised so that it depends on no one". Now as the world order reassesses itself in light of various upheavals, the same rhetoric rings true from the same quarter as it had over 60 years ago. On February 13, at the Munich Security Conference, French President Emmanuel Macron stated that "Europe has to learn to become a geopolitical power".

Over the past few weeks, Mr. Macron has been clear that Europe must fashion for itself a path of 'strategic autonomy' by deepening the EU's single market, reducing dependencies on external powers especially in critical sectors such as AI and rare-earth minerals, supporting domestic companies by bringing in a 'Buy European' drive, and focusing on creating deep-strike capabilities and re-articulating nuclear deterrence (France is currently the only nuclear power in the EU). On January 20, at the World Economic Forum in Davos, the French President emphasised, "...building more economic sovereignty and strategic economy, especially for the Europeans, ... is the core answer".

Mr. Macron's push for European autonomy is a result of three main geopolitical realities that Europe is facing at the moment. One, the Russia-Ukraine war. Europe has been supplying Ukraine with arms and aid. Even with such help, Russia is incrementally advancing into Ukrainian territory, with peace talks being endlessly dragged on without breakthroughs. Economic sanctions on Russia as well as Europe's support for Ukraine have meant that Russia is no longer a reliable energy partner for the bloc.

Second, the dominance of China and Chinese companies in areas of critical security such as rare-earth minerals/metals. European investments have not been able to withstand China's position as a fierce competitor in these sectors.

Finally, and the most alarming of all, has been the volatility of the U.S. as both a trade and a security partner. Considered its most traditional trade partner as well as its largest security guarantor under the NATO framework, the U.S. has now become a flashpoint for Europe. If the sweeping tariffs imposed by U.S. President Donald Trump were not enough, his aggressive bid for ownership of Greenland, an island under Danish sovereignty, has signalled to Mr. Macron that the U.S. is no longer reliable as a stable partner. "There are threats and intimidation and then suddenly Washington backs down. And we think it's over. But don't believe it for a second," Mr. Macron said in an interview earlier this month.

This is not the first time that the French leader has put forth his idea of European autonomy. In fact, right at the beginning of his political career in 2017, his foreign policy stood out for its emphasis on strategic autonomy for Europe. While the idea had few takers back then, Mr. Macron has stuck true to his initial stand. He reiterated his position in 2023, when, after a meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping, he said Europe must not become "America's followers" and that it must not get "caught up in crises that are not ours", referring to Europe possibly getting dragged into a confrontation between the U.S. and China over Taiwan.

Now, by using the 'Greenland moment', Mr. Macron is actively rallying European powers to confront their standing in the world order, and strengthen Europe's ability to stand up to both the U.S. and China. "We have the Chinese tsunami on the trade front, and we have minute-by-minute instability on the American side," Mr. Macron warned.

Regional distrust

Mr. Macron has advanced the call for European autonomy on two main policy pillars, the first being eurobonds. As individual nation states may not be able to fund the scaling up of critical sectors, a common borrowing mechanism will enable joint



ILLUSTRATION: R. RAJESH

investments in specific industries such as security and defence, climate, AI and quantum computing. These "eurobonds", Mr. Macron believes, could fund strategic investments for Europe and challenge the hegemony of the U.S. dollar.

The second policy is the Industrial Accelerator Act, which is expected to be published on February 25 by the European Commission. The Act is meant to reconcile decarbonising high emission industries with maintaining competitiveness both internally and internationally. One of its key provisions includes introducing local-content, that is 'Made in Europe'

requirements in public procurement and consumer schemes. It also imposes certain restrictive criteria on foreign investment in the EU.

However, Mr. Macron has been having a tough time convincing other European nations, especially Germany and Italy, Europe's two main industrial powerhouses. His 'Make in Europe' rhetoric, and pushback on foreign investment in critical sectors has come across as a tad too protectionist for Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and German Chancellor Friedrich Merz.

At the informal summit of leaders of the EU in Belgium on February 12,

member states committed to the idea of a 'One Europe, One Market', with Germany and France focusing on their goal of creating a "competitive industry in Europe", without clearly addressing the apparent differences in how they wish to achieve the same. However, Mr. Macron has always maintained that "all this must be done in consultation and coordination with all European partners" and structured at the level of the EU.

Domestic insecurities

However, all such grand plans may come to naught, if in next year's presidential elections in France, the far-right National Rally (RN) party comes to power. Mr. Macron will not be able to contest as there is a two-term constitutional limit on the presidency. This means that Emmanuel Macron has just one more year left in office. And if the RN does come to power, there is no guarantee that it will honour Mr. Macron's agenda and commitments to the EU, as the RN has always been a Eurosceptic party going as far as to suggest, at one point, leaving the bloc.

Mr. Macron has been trying to expand his influence within the French bureaucracy and potentially stop the Rally's populist agenda by appointing close allies to top government posts such as replacing France's top auditor, and reshuffling foreign embassies.

Mr. Macron's rule has been unstable ever since his announcement of snap elections in 2024 when his centrist alliance lost its majority in the European Parliament. As the sudden elections again resulted in a hung Parliament, he went on to appoint three different Prime Ministers in succession until October 2025, as each one was voted out by no-confidence motions or tendered resignations due to political backlash.

These successive short-lived governments have reduced Mr. Macron's standing both domestically and internationally. It remains to be seen how he attempts to bridge his European agenda with the hypernationalist discourse of the RN.

THE GIST

Emmanuel Macron has advanced the call for European autonomy on two main policy pillars, the first being Eurobonds, which envisages a common borrowing mechanism for member states

The second policy is the Industrial Accelerator Act, which is expected to be published on February 25 by the European Commission. This promotes a Make in Europe drive

But Macron has faced a tough time convincing other European nations, especially Germany and Italy, Europe's two main industrial powerhouses

Security dilemma

Anthropic

The Claude developer's push to be Washington's trusted AI partner while drawing red lines on surveillance now risks putting it at odds with the Pentagon

Vasudevan Mukunth

Anthropic has spent the last year trying to get into an awkward position: close enough to the U.S. national security apparatus to be treated as a frontier supplier but far enough to not get burnt. In one demonstration of this reputational yoga, it was revealed that the U.S. operation to abduct Venezuela President Nicolas Maduro on January 3 used Anthropic's AI model Claude.

More recently, Anthropic clashed with the Pentagon over safeguards to prevent fully autonomous weapons targeting and U.S. domestic surveillance. While Anthropic contended that these are non-negotiable limits, the Pentagon has held that commercial AI should be available for "all lawful purposes". Even more recently, the Pentagon has been considering designating Anthropic a "supply chain risk" – a tag that could pressure contractors to certify that they're not using Claude.

Why has Anthropic found itself in this bind? In 2025, the company publicly embraced a larger defence footprint by announcing an agreement with the U.S. Department of Defence worth \$200 million. It was a sign that Anthropic wanted to be the lab to say 'yes' to national security while still operating within limits, and in the



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process keep up a public reputation as a company that's part of the military machinery. Anthropic has also been trying to present itself as an enterprise productivity company rather than as a lab with a chatbot. Its partnership with Infosys, for instance, will pair its models with a firm that already sells compliance and governance services to industries that are heavily regulated.

Two ambitions

The reason for its bind is that a company that can claim to operate safely in government contexts with stringent security expectations can also plausibly sell itself to banks, manufacturers, and telecom companies. That is, to governments, Anthropic says: "We will help democratic states maintain a technological advantage but we won't accept deployments like autonomous targeting or expansive domestic surveillance". As a result, it gets to say to enterprises: "We can operationalise frontier AI inside environ-

ments with strict compliance requirements".

Unfortunately, these two ambitions have since collided. Anthropic appears to believe that conceding on autonomous targeting and domestic surveillance would destroy the line it has tried to draw with other frontier labs and entrants that are also courting defence customers.

The Pentagon, however, seems to be signalling that its vendors' moral compunctions are beside the point, especially once the vendors are inside the defence supply chain.

The enterprise automation layer – i.e. the coding and agentic systems that allow Claude to be embedded directly within workflows rather than keep it as a chatbot that enterprises use in an ad hoc way – is still one of Anthropic's main focus areas. And the company has also been trying to pitch its models' safety features as an advantage because its logic seems to be, regulators and enterprises will prefer

these models even when competitors develop more powerful alternatives. But this also means that if Anthropic yields to the Pentagon's demand, it could lose its signature differentiation, whereas if it refuses, the Pentagon could make an example of it.

The fact is that while Anthropic can try to control how Claude is used, its control will weaken once Claude leaves the building. Anthropic can say "you may not use Claude for x" in the terms of service or train the model to refuse certain requests, but even then, large customers rarely use an AI model as a standalone chatbot. Instead, they access it through cloud platforms, embed it inside software tools like for data analysis and automation, and they adapt it for specific missions. In other words, customers can work around the terms of service and the question of Anthropic's complicity still lingers.

In this sense, Anthropic's recent decisions are probably coherent. It bet that a market nervous about AI – e.g. governments worried about adversaries or enterprises worried about liability – will pay a premium for a developer that can both deploy and restrain. And the dispute with the Pentagon is the first major demonstration of what it will cost Anthropic to do both at once.

Deal in deep water

Chagos Islands

As the U.K.'s draft legislation to ratify the transfer of sovereignty over the Chagos Islands to Mauritius moves through Parliament, Trump is taking aim at the deal

Sruthi Darbhamulla

In a social media post, U.S. President Donald Trump asked the U.K. to "not give away Diego Garcia", referring to the site where a U.S.-U.K. military base is located in the Chagos archipelago.

The U.K. deal concerning the Chagos Island grouping is the result of a long negotiation surrounding the archipelago, located in the central Indian Ocean, around 1,600 km from the tip of the Indian subcontinent. The archipelago, positioned around 2,000 km north-east of Mauritius about mid-way between East Africa and Indonesia, is an overseas territory of the U.K., one of 14 remaining in the post-colonial era.

Officially referred to as the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT), the grouping consists of 60 islands set in seven ring-shaped coral atolls. The largest of the lot, Diego Garcia, plays host to the joint U.S.-U.K. military base, which reportedly has an airfield, a deep-water port, and communications and surveillance-related infrastructure. The islands have American and British military presence and contract civilian personnel, but do not host a permanent civilian population as of today.

The islands were uninhabited when they were discovered by Portuguese explorers in the 16th century.



REUTERS

Given its strategic location on international trade routes, several foreign powers sought to establish control over the archipelago. In the late 18th century, France took over the islands, along with Seychelles, treating them as dependencies of Mauritius. In the early 19th century, the islands were taken over by the U.K.; Mauritius and its dependencies were proclaimed colonies of Britain in 1814 under the Treaty of Paris. Seychelles was detached from Mauritius and became a separate colony in 1903. The BIOT came into being in 1965 following the U.S.-U.K. agreement.

Mauritius gained independence in 1968; the U.K. reportedly paid it a £3 million grant to maintain control over the Chagos Islands. In 1971, a military facility was constructed on Diego Garcia, and the local Ilois/Chagossians, descended from African slaves and Indian plantation workers, were offered the choice to relocate to Seychelles or Mauritius. While

most resettled in Mauritius, a few moved to the U.K.

Right to return

In 2000, the British High Court found that the removal of the Chagossians was illegal and granted them the right to return. While this was upheld by the Court of Appeal in 2007, it was reversed by the House of Lords in 2008. An ICJ advisory ruling in 2019 found that the decolonisation process pertaining to Mauritius was illegal and recommended that the U.K. stop its administration of the Chagos Islands.

Although non-binding, the ruling had international weight, and the U.K. government began negotiations over this in 2022, under then-Conservative Prime Minister Rishi Sunak. An agreement was sketched out in October 2024. A final treaty to transfer sovereignty over the islands to Mauritius was signed in May 2025 by Labour Prime Minister Keir Starmer and Mauritius Prime Minister Navin Ramgoolam. Before the treaty

enters into force, it needs to be ratified by legislation, and a draft law dealing with this is progressing through Parliament.

The plan, estimated to cost £3.4 billion, envisages the handing over of Chagos Islands to Mauritius by the U.K. and the leasing back of the military base in Diego Garcia for 99 years, at an average cost of £101 million a year. The deal includes a £40 million trust fund to support Chagossians, who will be permitted to resettle in all islands except Diego Garcia.

Mr. Trump has called the deal "an act of great stupidity", and the potential loss of the land "a blight on our Great Ally". Describing the island as "strategically located", Mr. Trump indicated that Diego Garcia may be brought into play "in order to eradicate a potential attack by a highly unstable and dangerous Regime" – a reference to Iran. He has also linked the deal to his own designs to acquire Greenland.

The U.K. has maintained that the deal is vital for the U.K.'s security interests, with Mr. Starmer noting that the deal was required to avert the risk of a future binding legal judgment affecting the U.K.'s ability to use the Diego Garcia base. On the other hand, the deal has invited criticism from Conservatives and Reform UK, who view Mauritius's ties with China with suspicion.

"THE DISCOVERY OF A NEW DISH DOES MORE FOR THE HAPPINESS OF THE HUMAN RACE THAN THE DISCOVERY OF A STAR"
— ANTHELME BRILLAT-SAVARIN

From restraint to renewal: The culinary wisdom of vrat season



ANIL
RAJPUT

As winter fades and spring approaches with its promise of renewal, families in India step into a contemplative season of vrats, sacred fasts that combine discipline with devotion. Across the country, vrats dedicated to Lord Shiva, Goddess Durga and Lord Vishnu, are widely observed with sombre dedication and prayers. As the lunar calendar aligns with the seasonal turn, the sequence of vrats, held in close succession, also allows a graduated adaptation of the body to this cyclical change. These events are more profound than mere ritual abstinence and carry a message of deep cultural intelligence. Kitchens are sanctified, freshly harvested grains set aside, ingredients prepared, and seasonal produce carefully collected to ensure that food itself becomes a medium of purification and renewal. Vrat is not merely a denial of nourishment but a dignified reiteration of purpose and discipline.

The observance of vrats is a long standing civilisational practice of the Indian subcontinent, rooted in the Vedic understanding of harmonizing body, season, cosmos and conscience. References to disciplined fasting appear as long back in history as the Vedas and later find expression in the Puranas and Dharmashastra literature, where abstinence is identified with mastery over self and not merely of ritual merit. Over time, the practice, once used by sages and rishis, evolved into a household practice, representing a balance between spiritual and social life.

The first of these fasts, Vrat Chaturthi, is observed on the fourth day of the lunar fortnight, and is associated with the worship of Ganesha, the remover of obstacles and considered auspicious for new beginnings. The most iconic offering during this vrat is Modak, steamed rice flour dumplings filled with jaggery and coconut, considered dear to Ganesha. Sabudana Khichdi, however, is the staple. Prepared by soaking the sago pearls in water and then added to diced boiled potatoes, crushed peanuts with a pinch of rock salt, it makes for a light and nourishing sattvic meal. Usually eaten around midday or early evening, it sustains devotees through worship while remaining light on digestion. Its mild flavour and steady carbohydrates provide stability on the first day of the vow, and its simplicity reflects the cultural belief that beginnings should be steady and unembellished.

Alongside it, Singhara Atta Puri offers a more substantial option for those who observe a partial fast. Water chestnut flour is kneaded with warm water and a touch of rock salt into a soft dough and prepared into small discs that are rolled and fried in ghee until they puff with a golden hue and acquire a delicate crispness. These puris are typically served after the main worship, paired with plain yogurt or a mild potato preparation, offering comfort without indulgence. A fourth preparation particularly in northern and western homes is the delectable Sweet Potato Chaat, made by boiling sweet potatoes until tender, dicing them, and tossing them with rock salt, crushed roasted peanuts, and a squeeze of lemon. Eaten in the afternoon, it offers a balance of sweetness and tang that feels restorative, while the root vegetable provides the grounding, a combination of steadiness and stability that is culturally associated with auspicious beginnings.

Shashthi Vrat, observed on the sixth day of the

lunar fortnight, is traditionally associated with the worship of Kartikeya (Murugan in the South) and is revered as the guardian of children. Its cuisine introduces a lighter culinary mood. With the body growing accustomed to warmer weather, the cuisine gradually reintroduces variety in texture, allowing flavours to deepen and moderate fats to return in measured balance. Sama Rice Pulao is thus the preferred midday dish, with barnyard millet being rinsed and cooked in ghee with cumin and small cubes of boiled potato. Roasted peanuts are added for a subtle crunch, while the grains remain separate and fluffy. The pulao is normally eaten during the afternoon, offering nourishment without being heavy on the digestive system allowing the devotee to remain focused in prayer. Kuttu Cheela provides a savoury variation. Buckwheat flour is mixed with water, rock salt, and occasionally grated bottle gourd, then spread thinly on a heated pan. Cooked with minimal ghee, it forms a soft pancake that can be enjoyed warm with yogurt. This preparation is frequently taken in the morning after worship, when the mind is still quiet and the body needs gentle fuel. A third dish that suits Shashthi well is Arbi Fry, a simple preparation with an earthy character that does not disrupt the reflective mood of the occasion. Taro roots are boiled until tender, peeled, sliced, and then shallow fried in ghee with cumin seeds and a light dusting of black pepper. Seasoned only with rock salt, the exterior turns crisp while the inside remains soft, offering textural variety without heaviness. Eaten at dusk alongside a light millet dish or yogurt, it reinforces the principle that fasting meals may be satisfying, but should never become indulgent.

Somvar Vrat, observed on Mondays, carries the austerity associated with Shiva, embodying restraint, dissolution and renewal. The cuisine responds with cooling, sattvic preparations that are focussed on milk, mild spices, and gentle flavours. Rajgira Roti is prepared for the early evening meal. Amaranth flour is combined with mashed boiled potatoes and enough water to form a pliable dough. The rotis are shaped by hand and cooked on a hot griddle with a light brushing of ghee. Naturally gluten free and rich in minerals, they provide strength without heaviness, and are often eaten after dusk, once the central worship is complete. Lauki Raita makes an ideal accompaniment, made with boiled grated bottle gourd which is added to fresh yogurt with roasted cumin powder and rock salt. This preparation, rich in probiotics, hydrates and soothes, making it particularly suitable for a day of extended prayers. The meals are accompanied by Thandai, a refreshing drink in which almonds and fennel seeds are soaked and ground into a paste with cardamom and blended into chilled milk. Consumed in the late afternoon or after worship, it cools the system and reflects the ascetic calm that Somvar seeks to cultivate. Also prepared on Somvar is Samak Rice Khichdi, a more overtly comforting meal for those who need sustained energy. Barnyard millet is cooked softly with

ghee, cumin, and small potato cubes until it becomes gently cohesive. Some households add crushed peanuts for body and flavour. It is typically eaten after the evening prayers, not in excess, yet fulfilling the day's nutritional needs.

Durga Ashtami Vrat, observed on the eighth day of the lunar fortnight, is associated with the worship of Goddess Durga, the embodiment of Shakti, divine strength, protection and righteous power. The cuisine on this occasion introduces a perceptible shift of emphasis. The mood is still restrained, but the kitchen allows a touch more richness to honour the energy of feminine power. Here, sweetness is dominant but not an indulgence. Rajgira Halwa is prepared by roasting amaranth flour slowly in ghee until it releases a nutty aroma. Warm water or milk is added gradually, and jaggery is stirred in until the mixture becomes soft and fragrant. The halwa is usually offered first to the deity before being shared. Singhara Atta Halwa offers a parallel preparation, the flour roasted, then sweetened and cooked to a smooth consistency. These sweets are not desserts in the conventional sense but concentrated sources of energy, intended to sustain devotees who may have

observed several days of moderate diets. To balance this sweetness, many homes include a savoury accompaniment that still conforms to fasting discipline. Kuttu Pakora is made by mixing buckwheat flour with water, rock salt, and finely chopped seasonal vegetables or even potatoes, then frying small pieces in hot ghee until crisp. Eaten after the day's worship, it provides a crispy contrast to halwa's softness and restores a sense of a complete meal, while still remaining within the cultural boundaries of the vrat. This interplay of sweet and savoury is not accidental. It reflects a civilisational instinct that devotion must be steady, and strength must be balanced, so that the devotee is not left either depleted or distracted by excess.

The cuisine associated with Rohini Vrat, aligned with lunar rhythms and devotion to Krishna, who is traditionally believed to have been born under the Rohini nakshatra, continues with the emphasis on milk and sweetness. Makhana Kheer is central to this day. Fox nuts are lightly roasted in ghee to enhance their texture before being simmered slowly in milk until they soften and swell. A hint of cardamom and a small portion of jaggery or mishri provide sweetness, while chopped almonds add contrast. The kheer is typically served after evening prayers, offering calm and satiety without heaviness. Panjiri, prepared by roasting ground vrat friendly flours with ghee and mixed with a liberal helping of crushed dry fruits, is also common. It is eaten in small portions, since it is rich in protein often in the morning or after worship. A third preparation is Banana Walnut Lassi, a gentle drink that supports devotees who observe long hours without solid food. Ripe bananas are blended into yogurt with a small quantity of rock sugar or jaggery and a few crushed walnuts, creating a beverage that is filling yet easy to digest. It is often taken in the afternoon, when energy may dip, and it mirrors the cultural association of Rohini with gentleness and restoration. The pastoral imagination associated with Krishna finds expression in these dairy rich offerings, where sweetness is mild, and nourishment is gentle, not stimulating.

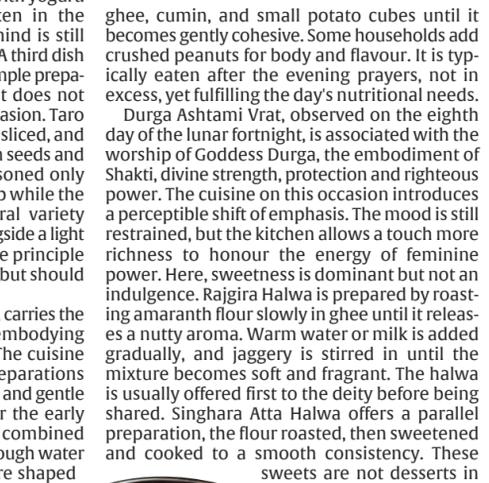
Amalaki Ekadashi is observed on the eleventh day (Ekadashi) of the waxing moon in the month of Phalgun and is dedicated to the worship of Vishnu, with special reverence offered to the amalaki or Indian gooseberry tree (amalaki). Central to the cuisine, therefore, is amla, a fruit revered not only for its sacred association but also for its immunity enhancing properties. Fresh amla are washed, deseeded, and finely chopped or grated. Amla Chutney is prepared by pounding the fruit with rock salt and mild green chilli, creating a sharp and invigorating accompaniment

that stimulates digestion. It is often taken with the first meal of the day, awakening the palate and signalling a shift toward cleansing. Amla Murabba, prepared by slowly cooking whole fruits in a light jaggery syrup, offers a gentler sweetness. Consumed in small quantities, it is valued not only for taste but for its vitamin rich properties, and it is often eaten later in the day, when the body seeks a restorative repast without heaviness. Makhana Kheer completes the Ekadashi table. Dried amla powder is stirred into fresh buttermilk with roasted cumin and rock salt, creating a beverage that is cooling, restorative, and light. Taken in the afternoon, it supports digestion and reinforces the theme of internal purification. To give the day a complete savoury centre, some households prepare Amla Samak Pulao, a dish that integrates the fruit without overpowering the palate. Barnyard millet is cooked fluffy in ghee, and finely chopped amla is sauteed briefly with cumin and rock salt. The result is mildly tart, clean, and surprisingly refreshing, and is often eaten after the main worship as the day's primary solid meal.

What emerges from this period of fasting is more than a series of observances of self-regulation and prayer but a choreography of indigenous cuisines that nourish without being overbearing. Each day, the balance is established between sweet and savoury, warm and cooling, substantial and cleansing.

The body is guided, with deliberate calibration, from a mellowed metabolism of the winter months toward a state of renewal, while the mind resets its attention from appetite to awareness. The cuisines honour season, deity, and digestion in equal measure, and they remind us that restraint in Indian civilisation was never designed to weaken life, but to refine and strengthen it. I believe that in preserving these traditions, we safeguard a civilisational memory in which food, faith and self discipline are seamlessly intertwined far more intimately than seasonal recipes or ritual menus. These vrats reflect an inherited wisdom that regards eating as a sacred responsibility, patience as refinement, and seasonal adaptation as cultural intelligence internalized so that it becomes a way of life. It is our collective responsibility, therefore, to sustain these practices that bind generations through a shared identity. In doing so, we will ensure that our spiritual and culinary heritage continues to find expression not only in places of worship, but in our homes, where civilisation quietly renews itself.

(The writer is Secretary, Cuisine India Society)



Muziris: A civilisational continuum of the spice route



GYANESHWAR DAYAL

Long before political borders and modern trade routes reshaped the world, Kerala's Malabar Coast stood as one of the great theatres of cultural exchange. The West came calling for its exotic spices that were unique to the place — black pepper, cardamom, cinnamon, cloves, ginger, nutmeg and turmeric. Carried by the rhythm of the monsoon winds, ships sailed into ancient Muziris not merely with cargo, but with languages, beliefs, aesthetics and ideas. It was also a place where culinary exchange took place. Many exotic fruits and vegetables were introduced to India through Kerala. Tomato, onion, potato, cauliflower, etc, which are today deemed to be Indian and are an indispensable part of the Indian kitchen, come from Europe and South America.

Today, through the Muziris Network and the International Spice Routes Conference, Kerala is reclaiming that legacy — repositioning itself not only as a historic spice hub, but as a living maritime civilisation shaped by dialogue across oceans.

Ancient Muziris, believed to have flourished between the 1st century BCE and the 14th century CE, connected India with the Mediterranean, Arabia, Africa and Southeast Asia. Classical accounts such as the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* and writings of Pliny the Elder described it as a thriving centre of pepper trade — "black gold" that drew Roman merchants across perilous waters. Yet archaeological discoveries at Pattanam — Roman amphorae, Mediterranean pottery, West Asian ceramics, beads and coins — reveal something deeper: Muziris was a cos-

opolitan settlement where cultures converged and coexisted.

This layered history now finds renewed life in the Muziris Network, a curated cluster of heritage sites across north Kerala. Rather than restoring a single monument, the project adopts a landscape approach, preserving temples, churches, mosques, synagogues, palaces and archaeological remains that together narrate centuries of maritime exchange. It is as much a cultural movement as a conservation initiative — linking research, museum curation, heritage tourism and contemporary art into a living dialogue between past and present. The gold and silver that came from the spice

In reimagining Muziris and reviving the Spice Route narrative, Kerala is not indulging in nostalgia but living it

trade filled the coffers of Kerala merchants and made them rich beyond proportion. Their palatial buildings dot the entire region.

Muziris fostered one of the earliest examples of multicultural coexistence in South Asia. Jewish, Christian, Muslim and Hindu communities flourished side by side along the coast. The synagogues of Paravur and Chendamangalam, early Syrian Christian churches and ancient mosques stand as enduring testimonies to this plural heritage. Maritime contact nurtured not only trade but tolerance — encouraging linguistic diversity, culinary cross-pollination and artistic synthesis that continue to define Kerala's identity.

The spirit of this cosmopolitan past resonates powerfully in the Kochi-

Muziris Biennale, India's largest contemporary art exhibition. Drawing inspiration from Muziris' ethos of openness, the Biennale invites global artists to engage with themes of migration, hybridity and memory — echoing the exchanges that once defined the port city. Literature too reflects this maritime imagination, from Sangam poetry celebrating Yavana traders to modern scholarship exploring transoceanic histories.

Historically, spices such as pepper and cardamom moved westward, while gold, wine and luxury goods arrived from Rome and West Asia. But commerce in Muziris extended beyond commodities — it was an exchange of worldviews. The prosperity generated by trade reshaped local economies

and social structures, embedding Kerala within a vast Indian Ocean network long before the age of globalisation.

That legacy gained contemporary momentum as Kochi hosted the first-ever International Spice Routes Conference at the historic Bolgatty Palace. Organised by the Muziris Heritage Project in collaboration with the Kerala Tourism Department, the conclave marked a significant step towards establishing a transnational Spice Routes Heritage Network. The presentation of its Charter signalled a new phase of cultural diplomacy among nations historically connected by the ancient trade corridor.

The conference unfolded as a sensory journey through history. Delegates participated in curated heritage trails across key Muziris sites, embarked on traditional sea voyages recalling ancient maritime journeys, and attended special showcases linked to the Kochi-Muziris Biennale. Performances of Kerala Jewish songs and the Latin-Christian classical dance-drama *Chavittu Nadakam* illuminated the layered exchanges that shaped the region's cultural fabric.

In reimagining Muziris and reviving the Spice Route narrative, Kerala is not indulging in nostalgia. It is reclaiming a civilisational identity forged through openness to the world. Against the backdrop of the Arabian Sea, the state is making a compelling statement — that its maritime past is not a relic of history, but a dynamic foundation for cultural engagement in the 21st century.



"IF YOU HAVE TAKEN A STEP INTO SPIRITUALITY,
BE HAPPY IN ANY CONDITION. EVEN IF YOU HAVE
TO GO THROUGH A TOUGH TIME,
DO IT WITH A SMILE"
— SRI SRI RAVI SHANKAR

What makes you awkward shows you the boundary of your comfort zone

GURUDEV SRI SRI RAVI SHANKAR

If you can embrace embarrassment, then nothing can shake you. If there's one thing people try to run away from, it is embarrassment. Embarrassment is a mild form of criticism, a mild form of feeling uncomfortable. At some point, we need to get out of the comfort zone and feel that little discomfort. Only then will you see abilities dawn in you.

Why do you feel awkward?

If you have always been the centre of attention and are suddenly sidelined, you may feel out of place. Similarly, if you have always been on the sidelines and are suddenly pushed to the centre, you may experience restlessness. If you are used to giving instructions and suddenly have to take orders, or if you usually follow orders and are made to give them, you may feel out of place. A very busy person with nothing to do, or a laid-back person who is faced with a lot of responsibilities, may experience restlessness. Very often, when you feel out of place and you are too conscious, you are not able to reason or be logical.

How can you overcome it?

If the situation you are in is inevitable, tolerate it; if it is avoidable, walk out of it. If you feel that it can expand your abilities, smile through it. Every awkward situation increases your comfort zone. It is a test of how deeply you are established in knowledge. Another thing you can do is love a certain aspect of an awkward situation. That increases your comfort zone. When your comfort zone expands, no one will be able to push your buttons, and you will become so centred and unshakable.

When you venture to do something new or put yourself in new situations, they make you a little nervous, right? You have this subconscious fear about what others will think of you. Do you know what is the best way to overcome embarrassment and awkwardness, and be natural in all situations and with everyone? One day, just for a few hours, imagine and behave as if you are a crazy person. So what if people think you are crazy? Let them think so. It doesn't matter. This will completely take care of the fear and inhibitions in you. You fear that people will call you a fool. Tell yourself, 'Okay, I am a fool. I accept it.' We simply need to see life from a bigger perspective.

Let me tell you a story. In my teenage years, I was very shy. I wouldn't sit amidst big crowds and would run away. But one day in Switzerland, I decided to wear a dhoti and walk on a road on a snowy morning! Everyone was looking at me when I started to walk, clad in a dhoti. 'Who is this preacher?' 'From where did he come?' 'Everybody wore thick coats and various other woollen garments. After this incident, nothing mattered to me. To break this monotonous idea about oneself, about respect and the fear of rejection, the fear of being laughed at - to get over



"IF YOU CAN EMBRACE EMBARRASSMENT, THEN NOTHING CAN SHAKE YOU. IF THERE'S ONE THING PEOPLE TRY TO RUN AWAY FROM IT IS EMBARRASSMENT"

— GURUDEV

all these, you need to act differently just for a day. Secondly, know that this is not the first time you have felt nervous. It has happened to you before, and you have overcome it. When you went to give an interview, your heart was pounding, or when you had to write an exam, you felt nervous. Remember those moments and remember how successfully you overcame those fears.

The third technique is more powerful. Breathe in from the back of your throat; it is called the 'ujayi' breath. A few rounds of deep breathing from the back of the throat, some physical exercises, and meditation will definitely help you overcome nervous jitters. Every time you feel embarrassed, take your mind inward, take a deep breath or two, and relax. And remember that you are with the truth.

Considering everyone as part of your own family also makes you very natural. You get rid of the sense of embarrassment. From your side, you feel connected with others, even if they don't do so. Stop worrying about what others think about you. People, their minds and opinions are

changing all the time.

Life is like a river. Sometimes logs float in the river water; at other times, stones and mud flow into the river. Come what may, the river water never remains stagnant. It always runs fresh and keeps flushing out the waste. Similarly, celebrate life as if it were a river.

Even then, if some nervousness and fear persist, practise the Sudarshan Kriya breathing technique for 15-20 minutes, and you will get back to your normal self in no time.

Whenever you feel uncomfortable in somebody's presence or in some situation, know you are coming in touch with the boundaries of your comfort zone. You have to go beyond that. You should make an uncomfortable situation comfortable for yourself. This barrier is the boundary that makes you confront your ego. The moment you accept and move on, it eases out.

Suppose you don't want to be called a fool or stupid, but someone says that you are stupid - that is when the ego gets hurt. Leave room for some introspection. In their perception, maybe you are stupid, but in reality, you may not be.

The whole world is just a perception. And if some people think that you are a fool, is that a big deal?

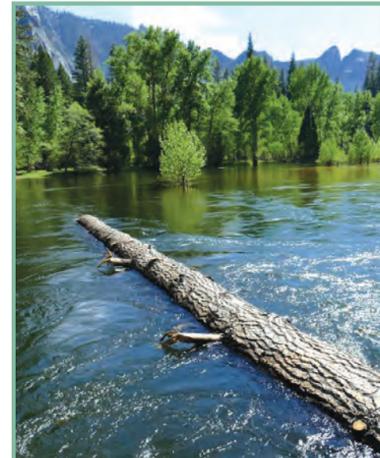
When somebody praises you for being intelligent, do you feel hurt? Do you think that it may not be true? This is known as 'Raag' and 'Dwesh'. The ego is connected to cravings and aversions. You crave to be intelligent and are averse to being stupid. Your mind plays such tricks on you.

So when someone calls you stupid, think, 'Oh yes, maybe that is their perception. Maybe I am stupid, who knows? Sometimes I could be stupid.' Now what has happened? Your ego is not on the track to react but to recognise. The ego never lets you recognise an event. It leads you to react.

The way of knowledge leads you to recognise a situation. Intelligent people move away from reaction to recognition. This is the only way to handle the ego. So instead of pouncing on the person who insulted you, just watch what is happening inside you. When someone says something unpleasant, you feel something contracting inside you. Just observe that and breathe consciously. This practice will help you become strong like steel.

Later on, you don't feel like reacting to unpleasant or pleasant comments. This is freedom. This is 'Mukti'.

Often, people act outside their nature to fit in



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with the so-called cool peer groups. When you try to do that, it becomes harder for you because you feel you are separate from them. First of all, you must feel natural. And how you can feel natural is when you prepare yourself to accept rejection openly.

If you think that others may not accept you because they think that you are a fool, then agree to be a fool in their perception. Secondly, however you are, be natural. Don't pretend. When you want to show yourself, pretend, or try to impress others, it creates problems for you.

Thirdly, don't force yourself to fit in with any person or group. Be natural. Different types of people live on earth, and you are of your unique type. Know that you are here to spread only positive energy and love. And if others don't have it, they need you more.

Usually, when you think that someone is negative, you try to run away from them. The underlying fear is that they may not respect you. Don't look for respect from anybody.

Here again, I want to emphasise that two types of people don't expect respect from others. One group says that they don't care what others think of them. It doesn't matter to them if others don't respect them. But inside their heart, they expect others to respect them.

On the other hand, there are people who feel that if others don't respect them, they will become sad, shy, or fearful. Try to move away from these feelings. Meditate. Meditation will help you to be natural and get rid of shyness or the fear of humiliation.

Light that lingers beyond the season



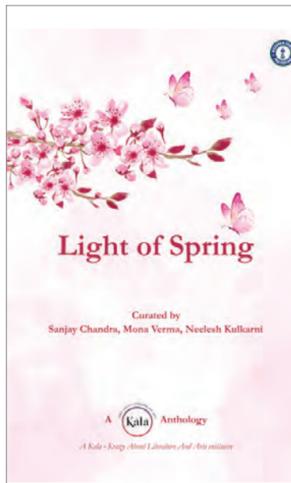
TEAM AGENDA

In an age where literary anthologies often become hurried compilations bound by theme but not temperament, *Light of Spring*, curated under the banner of Kala, arrives as a thoughtful and measured offering. It is not merely a seasonal metaphor; it is a philosophical inquiry into renewal, fragility and the quiet revolutions that define human experience.

Spring, in this anthology, is not treated as spectacle. It is not only blossom and breeze. It is hesitation before change, the tremor before confession, the courage before departure. The curators have resisted the temptation of overt symbolism and instead allowed each writer to interpret "light" through personal, social and existential lenses.

Bringing together 45 short stories by emerging writers, the anthology reflects a spectrum of voices at different stages of literary evolution. The diversity in perspective — geographical, generational and emotional — lends the collection both freshness and unpredictability. What unites these varied narratives is not uniform style, but a shared sincerity in engaging with the idea of renewal.

What stands out most is tonal diversity. Some stories unfold in the stillness of domestic interiors — balconies overlooking crowded cities, kitchens carrying unspoken histories, ageing protagonists confronting relevance. Others very rawness becomes part of the move outward into public spaces, where politics, memory and morality



Title: Light of Spring
Curated by: Mona Verma, Neelesh Kulkarni, Sanjay Chandra
MRP: ₹2134
Publisher: Highbrow Scribes

intersect. The anthology does not insist on optimism; rather, it explores transition. And in doing so, it achieves authenticity. As with any anthology of emerging voices, a few stories may read as unpolished in places — their edges visible, their craft still evolving. Yet that very rawness becomes part of the anthology's strength. There is an immediacy in these narratives, an absence

of excessive refinement, that preserves emotional truth. The reader senses not perfection, but presence — and that lends the collection a refreshing honesty.

Stylistically, the prose across contributions varies — lyrical in some pieces, sparse and journalistic in others. Yet the curation ensures cohesion. The language is accessible without being simplistic, reflective without becoming indulgent. The pacing of the anthology itself mirrors the season it invokes: gradual, attentive and patient.

If there is a critique to be made, it lies perhaps in its quietness. Readers expecting dramatic climaxes or experimental narrative structures may find the collection understated. But therein lies its integrity. *Light of Spring* is not an anthology that demands attention through volume; it earns it through sincerity.

Importantly, the anthology signals something larger than itself. Under Kala's literary vision, this appears to be the beginning of a seasonal quartet — an ambitious conceptual arc that promises Summer's intensity, Autumn's introspection and Winter's austerity. If *Light of Spring* is the overture, it sets a tone of seriousness and literary commitment.

In a cultural moment increasingly driven by speed and spectacle, this collection makes a case for pause. It reminds us that renewal is rarely dramatic. More often, it is a shift in perspective, a softened voice, a quiet decision to begin again. And perhaps that is the truest *light of spring*.

When availability replaces presence

PRATIKSHA VATS

Modern life has blurred the boundary between presence and availability. We are physically in one place, yet mentally on standby somewhere else. Sitting at dinner, but partially alert to incoming messages. Lying in bed, but half-prepared for tomorrow's demands. Even in moments meant for rest, part of the mind remains slightly open — as if waiting for permission to fully relax. The body may be still, but the mind remains suspended in anticipation.

Availability has quietly become a measure of reliability. Quick responses signal competence. Delayed replies feel risky. No one may explicitly demand constant responsiveness, yet we internalise the expectation. Over time, it stops feeling external. It becomes psychological. The mind begins to live in a state of subtle readiness — a quiet vigilance that rarely switches off. This readiness is not dramatic. It does not resemble panic. It feels responsible. Efficient. Productive. Yet beneath that surface runs a quiet tension — the sense that something might need you at any moment. And when the brain anticipates interruption, it does not fully disengage. It hovers.

Human attention, however, is not built for hovering. It is built for rhythm — engagement followed by recovery, immersion followed by release. When those cycles are disrupted, the mind struggles to power down. Thoughts linger longer than necessary. Unfinished tasks replay at night. Conversations are mentally revised hours later. Silence feels temporary, as if it could be broken at any second. Over time, this constant partial alertness reshapes the inner landscape.

At the core of being "always on" is anticipation. The mind scans for what might happen next — a message, a request, a reminder, a problem. Anticipation keeps us prepared. But when it becomes continuous, it prevents psychological closure. Closure is essential for mental recovery. It signals that something has been completed or safely contained.

Without it, the brain keeps open loops running in the background. Psychologists refer to this as rumination — repetitive thinking about unfinished tasks or unresolved expectations. Each unanswered message becomes a mental bookmark. Each notification adds another open loop. Individually, they seem harmless. Collectively, they occupy cognitive space.



This is why many people experience a distinct kind of exhaustion: not physical fatigue, but mental saturation. A sense of being busy without depth. Stimulated without satisfaction. Connected without feeling grounded. The mind is not overwhelmed by intensity. It is worn down by fragmentation.

Every interruption leaves behind what researchers call attention residue — traces of the previous task that linger after we shift focus. When interruptions are frequent, attention becomes shallow, and we move quickly between tasks but rarely sink fully into any of them. Deep focus fosters clarity, creativity and confidence, while fragmented attention fosters restlessness.

There is also a quieter loss: the disappearance of mental stillness. Boredom — once a gateway to reflection and imagination — is quickly filled, and the mind rarely wanders freely because it is constantly redirected.

Without uninterrupted thought, experiences remain unprocessed; conversations blur and ideas dissolve before they deepen. Life begins to feel thinner — not because it lacks meaning, but because attention never settles long enough to absorb it. The psychological cost extends into relationships, where divided attention weakens emotional presence.

Over time, these micro-moments accumulate — eye contact shortens, listening becomes partial, and conversations lose depth. But the deeper effect is internal. Fulfilment depends on immersion —

being fully absorbed in a moment. Partial engagement yields partial emotional reward. We attend to many things yet feel deeply connected to few.

This subtle thinning of experience can manifest as irritability, restlessness or vague dissatisfaction. We may describe ourselves as burned out or overstimulated while struggling to identify a single dramatic cause. It is not crisis. It is constant mild activation.

Night reveals the consequences most clearly. When the day ends without psychological closure, the mind does not switch off easily. Tasks replay. Tomorrow begins assembling itself in thought. Even in darkness, a small part of the brain remains prepared.

Sleep requires surrender — the confidence that nothing urgent demands attention. But when availability becomes habitual, surrender feels unsafe. The mind keeps a door slightly open.

The result is not always insomnia. It is lighter sleep. Rest that feels incomplete. Mornings that begin already mentally engaged. Over time, this pattern accumulates quietly. The mind does not collapse under sudden stress; it gradually thins under sustained alertness.

Much of this pattern is sustained by perceived urgency. Immediate response feels synonymous with importance, but most interruptions are informational, not critical. When we elevate the trivial to the level of the essential, the nervous system does not differentiate — interruption, repeated, becomes stress. The most concerning part is normalisation: hyper-responsiveness begins to feel standard, slowness indulgent, and rest undeserved. The solution is not total disconnection but intentional containment. Redefining urgency helps the brain distinguish between what truly requires immediate action and what can wait. Designated response windows and simple daily closure — such as writing down unfinished tasks — reduce rumination and restore mental rhythm. Presence must be chosen; otherwise, availability will quietly replace it. Being connected is not the problem — being always on is. If we do not reclaim our attention, the consequences arrive silently — day by day — until we realise we were reachable to everyone, but rarely present for our own lives.

(The writer is a Nutritionist, Health Coach and Wellness Writer)



The vibrating stillness of the legendary Robert Duvall

VARIETY PAGE 2



Why art often becomes a frontline in political battles across the world

ARTS PAGE 3

CHANDIGARH | 22 FEBRUARY 2026



Multi-percussionist Swarupa Ananth (above) feels that organisers often include women in concerts as a sign of tokenism.

Siddhi Shah took to drumming after watching Slipknot's Joey Jordison's videos.

STAGE IS HERS

As the upcoming 'Women Who Drum' show celebrates the feminine side of melodic elements, it's a recognition of their rise in the male-dominated world of percussion

NARENDRA KUSNUR

ON March 8, a group of female musicians will get together on the second day of the Mahindra Percussion Festival in Bengaluru. Spearheaded by tabla player and multi-percussionist Swarupa Ananth, 'Women Who Drum' also features Charu Hariharan on mridangam and Hamta Baghi on Iranian duff and frame drum, with Shalini Mohan on bass and Nush Lewis on harp. Swarupa says that instead of high-energy drumming one normally hears, they will look at the feminine side of percussion, with a lot of melodic elements.

The set provides another example of how more women are excelling in the world of percussion, often considered a male-dominated space. After tabla wizard Anuradha Pal, ghatam exponent Sukkanya Ramgopal and kanjira artiste Latha Ramachar paved the way in the 1990s, many younger ladies entered the field. Tabla players Rimpa Siva and Savani Talwalkar, and pakhawaj exponent Chitragada Agle Reshwal were among those who made a mark.

Some are even making waves abroad. Drummer Siddhi Shah has now settled down in Berlin, and is playing at the Mumbai Drum Day show on February 27. In the UK, Parv Kaur plays and teaches dhol, besides promoting bhangra, whereas Sukhmani Kaur Rayat is a prominent tabla player.

Things weren't easy earlier, as the field has been dominated by men. "I felt motivated to prove that women could not only play dhol but master it with strength, precision and stage presence. I've made a career out of a Punjabi musical instrument. Not many people in the UK can say that."

In 1999, Parv founded Eternal Taal to promote and perform bhangra to wider audiences. It is a structured brand comprising female DJs, dhol players and hosts specialising in weddings, festivals and corporate events. She feels the biggest challenge is to be taken seriously in a genre where women are often viewed as novelty acts.

While many women are learning Indian instruments, only a handful has taken up the western drum-kit. Sapna Desai-Mane, Shiksha Bali, Aarifah Rebello and Siddhi Shah practise the art. Originally from Pune, rock and metal fan Siddhi took to drumming after watching Slipknot's Joey Jordison's videos. She settled down in Berlin, which she visited for an intensive course. She too had her share of challenges: "Sometimes it has been the level of comfort working between males, being the only woman. Or that I didn't get the opportunity as the others didn't want a woman in their band. Other times, it has been biased judgment."

Despite the obstacles, Swarupa says a healthy sign is that more younger women are learning the instrument. "The Internet has also made a huge difference," she adds. Anuradha Pal sums up the situation succinctly: "Today, the landscape has definitely shifted. There is greater visibility, more institutional support, and wider acceptance of women as serious percussionists. My effort has always been to ensure that talent — not gender — defines opportunity, and that the next generation finds the doors a little more open than when I first walked in."

In tabla parlance, that's a perfect tihai. — The writer is a Mumbai-based music journalist

Exceptions were mridangam player Ranganayaki Ammal, who participated at the All India Music Conference in Madras in 1927, and Mumbai-based Aban Mistry, the first female tabla solo player. By the 1980s, more women took to learning percussion instruments, but there were many obstacles.

As Anuradha says, "When I began my journey, the idea of a woman percussionist — specially a tabla player — was almost unthinkable. Opportunities were limited not because of lack of talent, but because of deeply ingrained mindsets. Concert platforms, training spaces and even rehearsal rooms were largely closed to women."

In 1996, Anuradha formed the all-women classical ensemble Stree Shakti. Though she kept changing the line-up, Sukkanya and Latha were among the prominent percussionists. Sukkanya had her own set of struggles. Even her guru, ghatam legend Vikku Vinayakram, said her fingers were too delicate for the instrument. But she persisted. When she was 26, a musician refused to perform in a woman's company. She decided to prove a point by coming up with Ghata Tharang, a unique concept where she played six or seven ghatams of different pitches. Later, she launched Stree Taal Tarang, India's first all-women percussion ensemble. One of its aims was to create a dent in the male-dominated space.

Anuradha says when she started, there was scepticism, subtle discouragement and the constant need to prove that she belonged. She adds, "Not coming from a traditional musical lineage added another layer of difficulty. But those struggles became my training ground. They taught me resilience, focus and the importance of staying rooted in my art rather than seeking external validation." A disciple of Punjab gharana doyen Ustad Alla Rakha and Ustad Zakir Hussain, Anuradha has played with many great classical musicians, besides her innovative solo projects.

Because of their success in battling odds, Anuradha and Sukkanya have been considered role models. Swarupa, who

also goes by the name Tablanaari, says that besides her mentors Alla Rakha and Zakir Hussain, she has been hugely inspired by Aban Mistry and Anuradha. "These names were regularly taken in class. Growing up, I started following their work, besides male artistes like Trilok Gurtu and Ranjit Barot. There were foreign female drummers too, like Marilyn Mazur, Sheila E, Anika Nilles, and so many more," she says.

As a child, Swarupa never thought of percussion as a male-dominated field. She says, "I agree that there were only one or two girls in class, but I was fond of what I was learning. My parents encouraged me, rather than ask me to learn singing or violin, like many other girls. After a certain age, I understood the gender aspect, but the love for my instrument came first."

Besides tabla, Swarupa also picked up djembe, darbouka, congas and bongo. She thinks that very often, organisers include women in concerts as a sign of tokenism. She explains, "They will include one woman in a group of 15, just because they want to prove gender representation. I'd say that chances should be given as per the level of artistry, and not on the basis of gender." Keeping this in mind, Swarupa started 'Women Who Drum', a community which aims to foster "collaboration, empowerment and innovation" of women percussionists.

Birmingham resident Parv Kaur has been doing her bit to popularise dhol and bhangra. Growing up around live Punjabi music and performance, she was drawn to rhythm. She says, "The dhol stood out because of its power and how it commands

attention, creates energy and brings people together instantly. One instrument could change the entire atmosphere of a room." On being in a male-dominated field, she had her initial doubts — not from within, but from society. She says, "However, I never saw rhythm as gendered. Instead of feeling

Charu Hariharan, who hails from Kerala, initially learnt vocal music from her mother, singer B Arundhathi. Her love for rhythm made her switch to mridangam and she became a disciple of Mannarkoil J Balaji at the age of 10. She later played with slide guitarist Debashish Bhattacharya's project 'O Shakuntala'. Her mind opened up to global sounds after participating in the Ethno Sweden World Music Camp, and joining the world folk ensemble Vardens Band. She says, "Much as I like to explore international rhythms, I am also keen to discover more drum sounds closer home."

Charu says that personally she hasn't felt any discrimination. Her biggest inspirations are Sukkanya and Marilyn Mazur. She says, "What Sukkanya has done requires tremendous grit, confidence and passion. As for Marilyn, I love the way she approached her art." She is currently part of a project called 'The Sound of Women', featuring female folk musicians from Uttarakhand.

Rimpa Siva started off as a tabla prodigy, participating in music director Kalyanji's 'Little Wonders' series, and accompanying master flautist Pt Hariprasad Chaurasia when she was only 11. Other tabla artistes include maestro Suresh Talwalkar's daughter Savani, Mitali Khargonkar Vinchurkar, Unmesha Athavale Gangal, Mukta Raste, Sharmila Chatterjee, Reshma Pandit Baldua and UK-based Sukhmani Kaur Rayat.

In pakhawaj, Chitragada Agle Reshwal and Mahima Upadhyay have made a mark. Maharashtrian dhol players Swarangi Sawdekar and Yamini Khamkar accompany mridangam player Viveck Rajagopalan's 'Ta Dhom Project' at shows, whereas Neesha Mokul plays dholki and other instruments. In mridangam, there are Deepika Sreenivasan and K Veena Dhari, and kanjira players include R Krishnapriya. Among Punjabi dhol players, Jahan Geet Singh showed promise from a very young age, and has been featured on Zee Punjabi and Jalandhar Doordarshan.

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Mridangam player Charu Hariharan (centre) is part of a project called 'The Sound of Women', featuring female folk musicians from Uttarakhand.

Tabla maestro Anuradha Pal says today there is greater visibility, more institutional support, and wider acceptance of women as serious percussionists.

UK-based dhol player Parv Kaur never saw rhythm as gendered.

The moving stillness of ROBERT DUVALL

MURTAZA ALI KHAN

HERE are actors, and then there are presences. Robert Duvall belonged to that vanishing order of performers whose very stillness seemed to vibrate with interior life. With his passing, cinema loses not merely an actor of towering accomplishment, but one of the last unshakeable pillars of 20th-century screen acting — a craftsman who wore genius lightly and never mistook flamboyance for depth.

Born in 1931, Duvall carried within him the quiet discipline of his early years — including a brief stint in the US army — before moving to New York to chase the flickering dream of the stage. He supported himself as a postal clerk while studying acting, an image that now feels almost mythic: the future Oscar-winner sorting mail by day and absorbing Chekhov by night. In those classrooms, he found himself in extraordinary company — classmates named Dustin Hoffman and Gene Hackman. Three

controlled, intelligent performances in American cinema. Amid the operatic passions of the Corleone saga, Duvall's Hagen was the still eye of the storm — loyal, calculating, painfully human. He did not chew scenery; he inhabited it. In a film populated by titans, Duvall held his ground with quiet authority, making restraint feel monumental.

Then came Colonel Kilgore in *Apocalypse Now* — a performance so indelible that its cultural afterlife almost eclipses its brevity. Barely 11 minutes of screen time, yet enough for an Academy Award nomination and one of cinema's most iconic lines: "I love the smell of napalm in the morning." In Duvall's hands, Kilgore is not merely a caricature of war-mad bravado; he is a chilling embodiment of ruthless aggression — swaggering, real, and unforgettable. It takes a rare actor to create immortality in minutes.

If Hagen was restraint and Kilgore was mania, his Oscar-winning turn in *Tender Mercies* revealed yet another register — wounded tenderness. As a washed-up country singer seeking redemption, Duvall delivered a performance of aching minimalism, earning the Academy Award for Best Actor and reaffirming his extraordinary range. He sang his own songs in the film, lending authenticity to a character defined by regret and fragile hope. Duvall understood silence better than most actors understand dialogue.

One must also remember the haunting cameo in *To Kill a Mockingbird* — a near-wordless appearance as Boo Radley that lingers like a ghost in the American imagination. Even in those early years, he possessed the rare ability to say everything without speaking. His rugged gravitas in *Open Range* opposite Kevin Costner reaffirmed his affinity for the western — that most American of genres. Duvall brought classical masculinity into the 21st century without irony or apology. The same weathered authority enriched *Lonesome Dove*, where his portrayal of Augustus McCrae remains one of American television's most cherished performances.

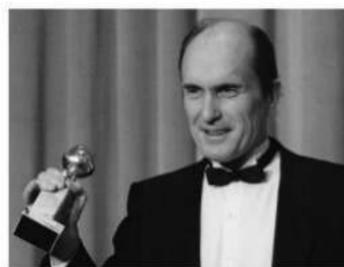
In *The Apostle*, which he also wrote and directed in 1997, Duvall delivered one of his most personal and spiritually complex performances, embodying a flawed preacher with raw conviction. Even late in his career, Duvall continued to astonish. In *The Judge*, he stood toe-to-toe with Robert Downey Jr, playing a stern, ailing patriarch with layers of pride, regret, and vulnerability. The performance earned him yet another Oscar nomination.

Time and again, Duvall demonstrated that he could disappear into a character without ever surrendering his unmistakable gravitas. Duvall never appeared desperate for relevance. He worked steadily, intelligently, often unpredictably. He could anchor a blockbuster, elevate a supporting role, direct with conviction, or slip quietly into a character part with equal authority.

In an era increasingly enamoured of spectacle, Duvall represented something sturdier — a faith in craft, in character, in the slow burn of performance. He did not perform for applause; he performed for truth. With Robert Duvall's departure, we bid farewell to one of the last great movie icons shaped by theatre discipline, studio-era storytelling, and the transformative energies of New Hollywood.

—The writer has served on the jury of various film festivals as well as National Film Awards

Duvall understood silence better than most actors understand dialogue. With his passing, cinema has lost one of the last unshakeable pillars of 20th-century screen acting



young men, all hungry, all uncertain, all destined to become Academy Award winners.

In their cramped apartments, the trio was united by a shared obsession — Marlon Brando. They would dissect Brando's performances with almost theological intensity, trying to decode the mystery of that raw, electric naturalism that had revolutionised screen acting. Yet, in time, Duvall would carve out a style entirely his own — less flamboyant than Brando, less visibly tortured, but perhaps more enduring.

His Tom Hagen in *The Godfather* and *The Godfather Part II* remains one of the most



THE EXTERNAL FACADE OF THE 16TH CENTURY PADMANABHAPURAM PALACE. PHOTOS BY THE WRITER

RAJNISH WATTAS

LOOKING at ancient India's rich Buddhist caves, with their ceremonial horseshoe arches adorning intricate stone-carved entrances, one encounters joinery details of typically timber architecture. But the original exquisite timber structures have now largely vanished. They were too aesthetically delicate and ornate to survive in wood — battling climate and corrosive forces of nature.

While most old temples in India transitioned to stone and brick, a few surviving wooden ones still stand out for their resplendent glory. A tall 13th century twin-tower temple complex dedicated to Goddess Bhimakali near Sarahan in Himachal Pradesh displays intricate wooden carvings and traditional slanting roofs.

Similarly, in the southern tip of the country lies the iconic Padmanabhapuram Palace in Kerala, famous for its refined ornamentation in wood. It is cited as the largest and best-preserved example of traditional wooden architecture in Asia, built primarily in teak and rosewood.

The remarkable 16th century wooden palace of the erstwhile Maharajas of Travancore (1550 to 1750 AD) is replete with intricate wood carvings and ornate murals. Located 52 km from Thiruvananthapuram, it is based on the historic building system *Taccusastra* (the science of carpentry), unique to this region.

Padmanabhapuram was the capital of the erstwhile Travancore state from about 1555 to the latter half of the 18th century. This land is rich in timber and traditionally all construction was done in wood, with laterite (locally available building stone) used minimally for plinths and walls. The region is characterised by a superior quality of building skills and great craftsmanship.

"Constructed primarily of wood, these buildings were erected with relatively strict adherence to the canons of *Taccusastra* — which were formulated over the years of experience obtained in building

Padmanabhapuram Palace in Kerala exemplifies India's exquisite architecture



An ornate bracket supports a wooden beam.

construction — crystallised into a number of formulae, governing proportions, dimensions, orientation, location and procedures, thus creating a genetic code for timber architecture," mentions the UNESCO site. It is currently on the tentative list awaiting official recognition as World Heritage property.

The roof structure of the palace is constructed out of timber, covered with clay tiles. From the street, the temple complex appears as a play of pyramidal roofs arranged around open courts. There are around 14 purpose-designed structures.

Nalukettu, the traditional Kerala architectural style, is characterised by a rectangular structure with four blocks surrounding a central open courtyard. The construction has been done primarily using wood, mud, stone, and interlocking joinery techniques without nails.

It adheres to Vaastu Shastra principles, featuring specific, oriented spaces for

kitchens in the southeast and bedrooms in the designated quarters.

The abiding experience of moving around in the palace precincts is to savour the genius of 'light and lattice' along the path of movement. In a great understanding of the hot and humid coastal climate, that has to contend with incessant rain and sultry weather in summer months, the cooling narrow corridors leading up to great royal courts make for a sensory experience: a play of light and shade.

These narrow, low passages open up into large audience halls for royal meetings with murals and artefacts.

The 14 features, including palaces and other ancillary structures, were gradual additions to the initial Thai Kottaram or Mother Palace. The later additions showcase the changing styles in architecture, with the influence of the Portuguese and the Dutch. The uniformity of style is maintained, while variety is achieved in differences in the details of decorative motifs.

The murals on the four walls of the top-most floor of the three-storeyed building or the Uppirikkamalika of this magnificent palace display the stylistics of the 17th and 18th century architecture of Kerala.

Carved doors and pillars, arching wooden grills along the verandah, the exquisitely carved brackets supporting the verandah, are some of the architectural features characteristic of this regional style resplendent at Padmanabhapuram.

Special features like the large bay window called Ambari Mukhappu on the external facade, supported by elaborately carved Vyala figures (a Hindu mythical creature), the remnants of the semi-transparent shell decorations of the windows, later restored with coloured mica, and the Manimalika or the clock tower, the movement of which is regulated by weights, are some of the unique features of the palace.

India is indeed a land full of rare and unique architectural styles, but few are as authentic and unique in its climate-responsive idiom as this one.

—The writer is former principal of the Chandigarh College of Architecture

CAPTION CONTEST 1550

HIMANSHU MAHAJAN



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 e-paper 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 1549



SPECTRUM FEBRUARY 15 ISSUE (SEE PHOTO)

Flute-ful job — Vineet Gupta, Jagadhri

Breath 'n' butter — Meenakshi Sharma via epaper, Amritsar

Noted vendor — Surendra Miglani via epaper, Kailthal

Carrying a million melodies on his back — Anil Sood, Panchkula

Music in pipeline — Ashwani Kalia, Ferozpur city

Winter's farewell in yellow

KACHCHI HALDI KI SABZI

INGREDIENTS

- Carrots 2
- Fenugreek seeds (soaked) 2 tbsp
- Turmeric powder 1 tsp
- Fresh raw turmeric 200 gm
- Ghee 1 cup
- Asafoetida/Hing ¼ tsp
- Cumin seeds/Jeera ½ tsp
- Cloves 5-6
- Cinnamon stick 1 inch
- Black cardamom 5
- Onions (chopped) 2
- Ginger (chopped) 1 tbsp
- Tomato (chopped) 1 tbsp
- Salt To taste
- Coriander powder 2 tsp
- Red chilli powder 2 tsp
- Fennel seeds powder 1 tsp
- Black peppercorn 1 tsp
- Dry mango powder 1½ tsp
- Water As required
- Green peas (boiled) 1½ cup
- Raisins (soaked) ¼ cup
- Curd ¼ cup
- Coriander (chopped) ¼ cup
- Mint sprig For garnish

METHOD

- Peel the carrots and cut into small cubes. Drain the soaked fenugreek seeds and boil them in fresh water with turmeric powder for 5-7 minutes to reduce bitterness. Strain and keep aside. Wash, peel, and chop the fresh turmeric. Keep aside.
- Heat ghee in a heavy-bottom pan. Add chopped turmeric and fry until crisp and golden brown. Add asafoetida, cumin seeds, cloves, cinnamon stick, and black cardamom. Let them splutter.
- Add chopped onions and saute until golden brown. Put chopped ginger, tomato and salt. Cook until the mixture becomes soft and ghee starts separating. Add coriander powder, red chilli powder, fennel powder, black pepper and dry mango powder. Mix well. Add chopped carrots and boiled fenugreek seeds. Mix and cook on low flame for 2 minutes. Add boiled green peas and cook for 2-3 minutes. Add soaked raisins. Stir gently.
- Whisk the curd and add it slowly to the sabzi, cook for 5 minutes. Add dry mango powder and adjust water to desired consistency. Cover and cook for 10-12 minutes on low flame.
- Finish with chopped fresh coriander. Garnish with mint sprig and serve hot.



showy. No rich gravies. No heavy spices hiding behind complexity. It tasted real — slightly bitter, deeply warm, strangely comforting. The kind of taste you understand only as you grow older.

In Punjab and Rajasthan, the *Kachchi haldi ki sabzi* marked a moment when the body prepared for change. When winter was ending but summer hadn't begun. It strengthened. It reset. It reminded you that nature moves gently, not abruptly.

For more than 4,000 years, turmeric has grown in Indian soil. It has spread its colour in wedding rituals, healed wounds, nourished new mothers, and flavoured everyday meals. Today, turmeric travels the world in new guises — golden latte in New York, immunity shots in Melbourne, capsules in London, luxury serums in Seoul.

And yet, somewhere between modular kitchens and microwave dinners, the humble *Kachchi haldi ki sabzi* slipped quietly out of memory.

Every year, when I see fresh turmeric in the market just as winter begins to retreat, something in me tightens gently. I see my grandmother's hands again — stained yellow, steady, sure.

The writer is a chef & entrepreneur

first. Hing releasing that sharp whisper. Jeera dancing in the heat. Then the grated fresh haldi — raw, intense, almost too honest — would touch the

kadahi. The aroma wasn't merely fragrant; it was grounding. Earthy. Healing. Alive. No rush. Just patience. Just presence. This recipe has never been

Silencing dissent

The world over, art often becomes a frontline in political battles

NEELAM MANSINGH CHOWDHRY

The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.
— Milan Kundera

ARTISTS hold a paradoxical place in society — undervalued in daily life yet powerful enough to be targeted when their voices and thoughts provoke. This invariably leads to intimidation and incarceration.

Artists speak because they must; it's in their blood to act as witnesses and record the truth of their times, even if threatened, vilified or silenced. They become chroniclers for posterity, holding multiple mirrors that record, reflect and investigate the human condition in all its fragility and decay. In democracies, where free speech is supposed to be protected, eliminating artists isn't just about silencing voices, but erasing resistance.

Saadat Hasan Manto cut through the madness of 1947 with brutal honesty. 'Tamas', Govind Nihalani's unforgettable series based on Bhisham Sahni's novel, laid bare the circumstances that led to communal riots. Anne Frank's 'The Diary of a Young Girl' revealed the horrors of the Holocaust through a girl's intimate voice.

The Nazis had trashed modern art as being degenerate and confiscated the works of Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky, forcing them to flee or face imprisonment. The list is endless.

India has seen numerous instances where artists have been targeted by self-styled vigilante groups, often invoking "hurt sentiments" or blasphemy laws to justify censorship or violence towards the arts that did not adhere to the ideology of the ruling dispensation.

Both cases show ingenuity in using innocent cultural spaces — festivals or entertainment — to bypass surveillance, build solidarity and advance political goals under repressive regimes. History has many parallels, from coded messages in theatre during occupations to protest songs in authoritarian contexts today. These examples serve as a reminder of how art can become a quiet but potent form of resistance.

Unlike straightforward journalism or activism, art can sometimes evade censorship because it is interpretive, metaphorical and at times encased in euphemism. Creativity thrives on freedom, which inherently clashes with authoritarian conformity. Artists often reject norms, experiment with ideas, and push boundaries, asserting individual imagination. Regimes view this as a threat to social order, fearing that artistic freedom could be a threat to existing ideologies. By banning, jailing, or killing artists, leaders send a message: dissent will not be tolerated.

In the late 19th century, the British had imposed restrictions on public assemblies to suppress nationalist activities. To avoid these strictures, Lokmanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak transformed Ganesh Chaturthi — traditionally a family-based Hindu religious festival — into a public celebration.

This started around 1893 in Maharashtra. He installed community Ganpati idols in *mandaps*, with processions, patriotic songs, lectures and discussions infused with nationalist themes. This allowed thousands to gather "legitimately" under the guise of religious devotion, fostering unity across castes, promoting self-rule and subtly criticising British policies, without directly violating assembly bans. It became a powerful tool for mass mobilisation, hence laying the ground for the freedom struggle.

Similarly, during World War II in Nazi-occupied France, the French Resistance used cabarets, music halls and performance spaces as a cover for covert activities. Cabaret artistes used their fame and international tours to spy, hiding notes in music sheets and eavesdropping on Nazi officers at performances. Cabarets in areas like Montmartre in Paris continued operating under occupation, allowing performers and audiences to network discreetly.

Both cases show ingenuity in using innocent cultural spaces — festivals or entertainment — to bypass surveillance, build solidarity and advance political goals under repressive regimes. History has many parallels, from coded messages in theatre during occupations to protest songs in authoritarian contexts today. These examples serve as a reminder of how art can become a quiet but potent form of resistance.

Safdar Hashmi was a prominent playwright, street theatre artiste and activist.



(Clockwise from left) Safdar Hashmi was killed for his play's criticism of politicians and industrialists. PHOTO COURTESY: JANA NATYA MANCH; a plaque saying "Vsevolod Emilyevich Meyerhold lived in this house in 1902-1903" in Kherson, Ukraine. ISTOCK; artist MF Husain. FILE PHOTO: THE TRIBUNE



His group, Jana Natya Manch, performed plays like 'Halla Bol' that critiqued exploitation, casteism, and corporate-political nexus — issues that directly challenged the ruling Congress party's interests during that period.

On January 1, 1989, during a performance in Sahibabad, Hashmi was brutally attacked and killed by alleged political-backed goons. The assault was linked to his play's criticism of local politicians and industrialists.

Why the fear? This is a question I often ask. If art and artist have no real significance in most people's daily life, then why this need to stifle, muffle and silence the artist? Hashmi's art wasn't just entertainment; it was a political message, marking him as a threat. Despite India's constitutional protections for free speech, such killings highlight how democratic governments use violence to silence dissent when it hits close to home. This case led to widespread protests. It underscored that democracies aren't immune to fear.

Vsevolod Meyerhold was a revolutionary theatre director whose innovative, avant-garde style clashed with Stalin's socialist realism doctrine. Meyerhold was tortured and executed in 1940 on fabricated charges of espionage.

His experimental art challenged the state's monopoly on cultural expression. Stalin feared Meyerhold because he revealed the absurdity of propaganda. This wasn't unique to Russia; it reflects how dictatorships eliminate individual perceptions and viewpoints to enforce ideological conformity.

Federico Garcia Lorca, a celebrated poet and playwright, famous for his rural trilogy ('Yerma', 'Blood Wedding' and 'The House of Bernarda Alba'), explored themes of repression, sexuality and social injustice in rural Spain. He was killed in 1936 as his works were considered subversive and clashed with the values of the right-wing government. These plays were seen as promoting liberal, even revolutionary, ideas about women's rights and also explored women's desire, a definite challenge to patriarchy.

Artists are feared because they wield "soft power" that can disrupt hard power. This fear persists when art intersects with politics and is amplified in repressive systems like Stalin's Russia or Franco's Spain. While protections exist on paper, history shows that when artists become too effective in mirroring society's flaws to its leaders, retaliation follows.

Painter MF Husain faced severe backlash for his depictions of Hindu deities, which

some groups deemed offensive. In 1998, his house was attacked and his paintings vandalised, demonstrating how "hurt" became a tool for cultural policing, with both the attackers and the supporters invoking religious and emotional rhetoric in public debates.

Habib Tanvir, a renowned playwright and director known for incorporating folk traditions and tribal performers into his work, encountered opposition from right-wing groups. His play 'Punga Pandit' was cancelled at the last minute, turning the iconic Tanvir into a cultural pariah. This particular play, like most of his work, critiqued social hierarchies, drawing ire for perceived religious insensitivity.

The story of repression of ideas recurs across nearly every era of human history. In ancient Greece, Socrates was tried for his failure in honouring the city's gods and corrupting the youth. He was made to drink the poisonous hemlock for questioning norms.

These are examples of how art — whether in India or globally — often becomes a frontline in political battles. A brilliant film like 'Punjab 95', directed by Honey Trehan, is languishing in cans, becoming a sign of how narratives get suppressed. A tragic fallout becomes self-censorship.

— The writer is a theatre director

Puppeteer Dadi Pudumjee's latest directorial is a vibrant celebration of artist Amrita Sher-Gil

STRINGING A CANVAS

SARIKA SHARMA

AMRITA SHER-GIL died at the age of 28, leaving behind barely 172 documented works of art. A blend of Indian and western aesthetics, these works placed her high on the pedestal of modern art in India. Avant-garde yet stylistically simple, these were declared a national treasure in 1976, prohibiting their export. It is this enigmatic life that India's leading puppeteer, Dadi Pudumjee, is capturing in his latest work, 'Amrita Sher-Gil: A Life Lived'. It is being staged at the 22nd Ishara International Puppet Theatre Festival in New Delhi on February 22.

Dadi's last directorial venture was 'Rumiyaana', which told stories from the Sufi poet's most famous work, 'Masnavi'. This time, he says, he wanted to explore something around art and colour and was led to the story of Amrita Sher-Gil. "A biographer will always talk about what she did, how she did it, where she did it, etc. But how do we say the same thing in a visual narrative? That was a challenge we took."

Amrita is an icon, known to anyone who cares about art. Dadi wanted to go beyond the cursory details, selecting certain aspects of her character, her life and her movement. Research followed: meeting people, reading books and consulting definitive volumes such as those by Vivan Sundaram, an artist and nephew of Amrita, as well as Yashodhara Dalmia's biography. What emerged was an engaging and colourful portrait of a fiercely independent and rebel-



(L-R) Realistic puppets set apart this play from Ishara's traditional shows; Dadi Pudumjee wanted to capture the movement in the artist's life; the many facets of Amrita Sher-Gil.



lious young woman in colonial India. Instead of following the regular trajectory of a biographical show, the team decided to explore Amrita's life through five students brainstorming over a project on the artist at a cafe in Paris. The artist manifests as a puppet and takes them along on her journey.

The show marries theatre and puppetry. There are monologues too — such as one by her father, scholar Umrao Singh, speaking about her birth, and another by her husband, Victor, who was also her first cousin and whom she married to the displeasure of her mother, Marie Antoinette Gottesman.

Dadi says Amrita was a rebel, both in her personal life and in her art. "All that subtly comes into the story," he says. Various departments at Ishara came together to create 'Amrita Sher-Gil: A Life Lived'. "We work with puppets, actors, masks and

music, and we saw all of them fit into this one person's narrative."

The show uses a lot of music, one reason behind which was that Amrita's mother was an opera singer. "We read about a piece by Giacomo Puccini that she would sing and have used that in the play as well," says Dadi. In addition, there is classical Baroque music, a Hungarian song and live singing by the actors.

Dadi is known as the father of modern puppetry in India. To tell this story, however, he has made a stylistic deviation. Known for his larger-than-life puppets, he has created realistic faces of Amrita, her father and her mother with the help of a sculptor.

Amrita travelled frequently between India, Hungary and Paris, and these journeys deeply impacted her work. While studying in Paris and earning herself a

reputation and awards, she began to feel drawn back to India. She returned towards the end of 1934 and found "the inspiration she needed as she travelled around the country and reconnected with its people".

For Dadi, this movement is intriguing. "She was never in one place. What's most interesting," he says, "is that she was born under the Aquarian sign. Whether you like it or not, if you read the Aquarian horoscope, it's almost exactly like what Amrita was — like flowing water, never in one place. This was discussed a lot in the beginning. Some people laughed about it. But when you read that, it somehow fits into place."

In his five-decade career as a puppeteer, Dadi has created shows based on popular stories, but his oeuvre does not include many biographical productions. The only other one he directed was 'Images of Truth',

a play on Mahatma Gandhi for the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts. That production relied heavily on music, whereas this one makes use of text from Amrita's letters and diaries, as well as books.

Dadi says the show could not have been made without support from the Hungarian Cultural Centre, Delhi, the Sher-Gil Sundaram Arts Foundation and the National Gallery of Modern Art. However, he adds that they need collaborators to take it to other places. It was not part of the line-up at the puppet theatre festival which has simultaneously been held at Chandigarh's Tagore Theatre for many editions. The last large show he brought there was 'Heer ke Waris' more than a decade back.

"I would love to bring it to Chandigarh and Punjab," he says, adding, "but we cannot do everything ourselves. We need someone to support us".

BOOKS

Forgotten French influence, legacy

SUCHETA MAHAJAN

THE forgotten history that this book by Robert Ivermee refers to is the first century of French expansion in India. The author's central thesis is that this period of French imperialism in India has been ignored by mainstream scholarship on imperialism and colonialism in South Asia. Hence, when we think of the French presence in India, we limit our vision to Pondicherry. A few may know of Mahe, Karikal, Yanam and Chandernagore. The popular impression is of a country which helped the Indian anti-colonial movement, not an imperialist power like the British. This is what the book questions.

The author points out that the establishment of British rule over South Asia was far from inevitable. There were other serious contenders, including the Portuguese, Dutch and French. Further, British strategies of conquest and revenue collection in India were built on precedents set by the French. In fact, Dutch and Portuguese colonialisms were also shaped by interactions with the French. This early period of France's imperial past offers many insights into the nature of imperialism, both formal and informal, and into the various strategies that strengthened colonialism, especially in Asia. The author contends that though the French were militarily and politically defeated, they left a legacy.

An exciting episode in the history of French influence over India comes from



GLORIOUS FAILURE: THE FORGOTTEN HISTORY OF FRENCH IMPERIALISM IN INDIA
by Robert Ivermee.
Westland.
Pages 384.
₹699

The early period of French presence in India offers insights into the nature of imperialism and the strategies that strengthened colonialism

what one may call its pre-history, that is, before the official company is formed and sets out for India. Private traders get together, raise money, and come out to the East to take advantage of the lucrative

maritime trade in precious spices, such as pepper, that Europe is eyeing.

One of the interesting persons here is a navigator by the name of Pyrard, who reached the Maldives after difficult passages, at a time when the ruler of Chittagong had defeated the Sultan. He boarded one of the ships carrying soldiers returning to the Bengal Delta and reached the subcontinent proper.

Another fascinating passage in his journey is how he evades capture and execution by the hostile Dutch and Portuguese, gains the patronage of Zamorin, the ruler of Calicut, and gets into the good books of the Portuguese.

This gentleman, who has no formal training, becomes a window to the East by virtue of his knowledge of geography and his travels to diverse places, making him sought after on his return home to France. The court in Paris summons him, he becomes a very well-known figure, and his life story is published.

Interestingly, the opinion he brings home about Indians is very positive. He is quoted as saying that the Indians are not savages, as believed. He adds that he has rarely met people as refined and polite as Indians. This is a remarkable statement at a time when before the Orientalists, the stereotype about India in the West was entirely negative.

A particularly significant and somewhat unusual feature of the French East India Company, established in 1664, lies in the ideological framing of its mandate.

Beyond its commercial objectives — including the pursuit of profit, the expansion of trade, the right to acquire territory, and permission to wage war — the Company's charter also reflected the religious and civilisational assumptions characteristic of 17th-century European imperial enterprises.

Notably, the Company was granted the authority to wage war against non-Christians. This provision is especially revealing as it underscores the extent to which early modern commercial expansion was intertwined with religious justification. Economic ambition, military power and confessional identity were not treated as separate domains, but rather as mutually reinforcing elements of imperial policy.

The book takes the story up to the early 19th century with the formal closure of hostilities with the British and, equally significantly, the outlawing of the slave trade, marking the end of imperial military, political and economic interests.

For a historian, the nuanced retelling of the story of Anglo-French conflict, beyond the usual textbook stereotype of the Dupleix-Clive rivalry, is reason enough to recommend the book to teachers, students, and interested readers alike. A second aspect is the book's drawing our attention to the slave trade that prevailed in the Indian Ocean, linking Bengal, Africa and Europe. This, too, is forgotten history.

— *The reviewer is former professor of history at the Centre for Historical Studies, JNU*

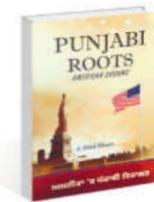


BACKFLAP



THE INDIAN CALIPHATE
by Imran Mulla.
HarperCollins.
Pages 285. ₹799

Turkey abolished the 1,300-year-old Caliphate in 1924, expelling Abdulmejid II, the last Ottoman Caliph, from Istanbul. Indian politician Shaikat Ali brokered a marital alliance between the Ottomans and the Nizam of Hyderabad, cementing Hyderabad's status as a global Muslim capital, leaving Abdulmejid's grandson perfectly placed to claim the Caliphate. But Partition in 1947 ended this prospect. The book details this extraordinary history, revealing that India was, in many ways, the very epicentre of the Islamic world in the early 20th century.



PUNJABI ROOTS AMERICAN DREAMS
by S Ashok Bhaura.
₹200

This book is an ensemble of Punjabis from diverse fields who have achieved great heights in the US, living the American dream. These individuals made a name for themselves in agriculture, business, food chains, banking, art, education and social service. Some are inspiring tales of daily-wagers who went on to own thousands of acres of land, chains of gas stations and food outlets. There are others who have excelled in the fields of health, engineering and banking.



BATTLEGROUND BENGAL
by Sayantan Ghosh.
Penguin Random House.
Pages 402. ₹699

Politically dominated by the TMC, West Bengal has a new challenger: the BJP, which has slowly made inroads into the political arena, winning 77 seats in the 2021 Assembly election, a significant jump from its 2016 tally of three. The author presents a critique of the contemporary political scene and looks back at the state's recent history for clues about its possible future. 'Battleground Bengal' reveals how identity, patronage and fear continue to shape West Bengal's politics, regardless of who is at the helm.

PTI's unsung heroes

SANDEEP DIKSHIT

FOR the digital revolution generation whose sources of information are diverse, the name Press Trust of India might not ring a bell. Today, PTI has 4.3 million followers on X, less than half of Asian News International (ANI), a relative newcomer. PTI's reach has not declined. Neither has its trustworthiness. It's simply a worldwide trend where there are hundreds of reporters and visual capturing devices as opposed to just five or six reporters at the spot. And often in earlier times, there was none but the PTI man.

'What They Don't Teach You in Journalism Schools' is a collective endeavour of some veterans of the print news industry on the times when PTI correspondents were the first to inform the nation about a slew of assassinations, reported from the heat of battlefields, fetched sports scores from playgrounds all over the world, broke down the salient features of the Union Budget year after year, and gave a balanced, non-sensationalist account of inflamed passions due to communalism or sectarian strife.

Bylines of newspaper reporters and visages of TV reporters become well known, but PTI correspondents filed copies anonymously. What the book modestly doesn't mention is that down the ages, most of these well-known newspaper and TV reporters occasionally, if not routinely, affixed their names after a mild modification of copies filed by those anonymous PTI reporters. Nearly all of them were known by their three alphabet initials, affixed to the end of the PTI copy.

Though retired decades back, they are still known by their acronyms. As former J&K Governor NN Vohra notes, the book has resurrected the memory of nameless and faceless PTI staffers and technicians, one of whom was over 100 years old when he contributed to this volume.

Every morning, there is still a healthy proportion of stories from the PTI network in



WHAT THEY DON'T TEACH YOU IN JOURNALISM SCHOOLS
Edited by Sameer C Mohindru.
Pages 575. ₹700

newspapers and news bulletins. But this book reveals how in the absence of the Internet, PTI reporters would, after immense struggle, get the story out from areas barely connected by phone.

Often it was a relay network of reporters trying to be lightning quick while being accurate and factual. And they succeeded very time. Or were it the lonely vigils and intrepid chasing of the target that yielded a newsbreak that the world lapped up?

The short chapters and the shift to a different topic break the monotony, but the effort at times is marred by loose language and odd juxtapositions, like the cricket series against Pakistan where Anil Kumble took 10 wickets in an innings with the progress of the Kargil War. Both would have been good enough if they stood separately.

A professional editor would have excised some hyperbole as well, leading to a slimmer volume. Much is also made, as if it was a badge of honour, of accompanying VIPs for visits abroad. The book though lives up to its name by providing a deep insight into how PTI managed to keep abreast of technology with an in-house R&D team that acted as a start-up to change wire delivery forever.

There is also some riveting courtroom drama featuring its reporters, and even undercover reporting as a Red Cross worker at the fighting in Jaffna, Sri Lanka.

— *The reviewer is a senior journalist*

Songs of melancholy

BILAL GANI

FOR decades, Kashmiri Pandits have endured a never-ending harsh winter that has kept them detached from home. In 'The Valley of Unfinished Songs', radio jockey-turned-author Umair Ahmed Khan narrates this tale of loss and grief for a new audience.

It centres around Kabir Raina, who was uprooted during the turmoil of the 1990s in Kashmir. He carries his scars with him to Mumbai, which promises a new life away from the violence and destruction back home.

Umair's narration is gut-wrenching. It acquaints us with the trauma and suffering experienced by generations of Kashmiri Pandits. There is Iravati, Kabir's mother, whose husband Purushottam drowned in Dal Lake while escaping a marauding mob when Kashmir's resistance turned communal. Umair writes: "The bubbles on the surface of the water reflected Iravati's life sinking with Purushottam's drowning. The sight of those bubbles disappearing into the depths of the lake filled her with a profound sense of loss, as if she were drowning with them, sinking deeper and deeper into the abyss."

When Kabir loses his wife and children in Mumbai, he returns to his lost home, desperately seeking solace, convinced that only Kashmir can now redeem his traumatised soul. There, he encounters Armaan, a blind boy with a magical voice. A companionship grows between these two souls, each affected by Kashmir's bloody conflict in different ways.

The bond with Armaan becomes complicated when Kabir discovers that the boy is the son of the militant responsible for his father's death.

Beautifully written, this novel places



THE VALLEY OF UNFINISHED SONGS
by Umair Ahmed Khan.
Rupa.
Pages 328.
₹495

readers in Kashmir amid its suffering, melancholy and grief. Umair's prose offers a lyrical portrayal of a land where beauty and pain coexist. It is a devastating read on exile, memory and belonging.

Umair highlights the power of music as an emotional healer for wounded souls. The mystical bond between Kabir and Armaan, forged through song, depicts the human desire to overcome lingering trauma and tragedy.

Displacement is a haunting experience, and Umair is attentive in detailing its catastrophic human costs. The silent yet unbearable pain suffered by those away from home reveals the centrality of belonging and the universality of grief. In Kashmir, conflict did not discriminate between Muslims and Pandits; it inflicted pain on all.

At a time when the return of Kashmiri Pandits has become a political gimmick, this novel illustrates how devastating such rhetoric has been for so many.

Brutally honest and evocative, 'The Valley of Unfinished Songs' is a powerful testament to one of the bloodiest human tragedies — a haunting and remarkable debut that announces the arrival of a major new talent.

— *The reviewer is an academic based in Kashmir*

A call for hope against narrowness of spirit

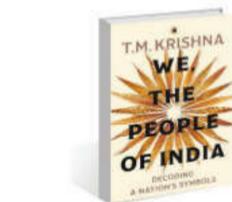
ANIRBAN BANDYOPADHYAY

T.M. KRISHNA is a first-rate practitioner of Carnatic classical music but also a perceptive and often bracing critic of its social hierarchies and historical baggage. As a public intellectual, he has weighed in on urgent national concerns with rare courage. In his latest book, Krishna brings his artist's eye for beauty and the critic's scalpel for power to bear on the very idea of India. The result is a collection of five long, interconnected essays that examine the philosophical meaning and contemporary fate of the republic's founding symbols.

Krishna trains his focus on five iconic representations of the Indian state: the national flag, the lion capital, the motto *Satyameva Jayate* (Truth Alone Triumphs), the national anthem *Jana Gana Mana*, and the Preamble to the Constitution. His central argument is both a lament and a call to action. He contends that the ennobling

potential originally invested in these symbols has been hollowed out over time, reduced to ritualistic banalities. Simultaneously, he argues, selective and mischievous appropriations of these symbols have allowed their more negative interpretations to fester, assuming menacing proportions in our contemporary public life.

The book is presented as a call for hope against the narrowness of spirit which appears to plague the present moment. Krishna turns to history as a wellspring of hope, drawing inspiration from the founding fathers of the republic. He marvels at how, in the midst of Partition's trauma, staggering poverty, and illiteracy, figures like Nehru, Ambedkar, Patel and their peers made a conscious political choice. They decided to craft a narrative of a beautiful, unifying past. Aware of the wounded and textured pasts that littered Indian history, they deliberately selected strands that would help a scared people look forward, together. For Krishna, this act of choosing hope over rancour or resentment



WE THE PEOPLE OF INDIA: DECODING NATION'S SYMBOLS
by T.M. Krishna.
Westland.
Pages 480.
₹899

is the template we need to revisit.

His project, therefore, is to recharge these symbols. He attempts this through a robustly positive and creative reading, rendered in an accessible prose. The book's structure mirrors this intent. Each chapter is a fluid journey. Krishna meticulously reconstructs the often messy process by

which a symbol was adopted. Simultaneously, he branches out into related historical actors and philosophical traditions, offering a rich history of early 20th-century India. This is not dry academic history. The past is immediately placed in dialogue with the present, often in uncompromising detail.

Consider the chapter on *Satyameva Jayate*. In tracing its journey from the 'Mundaka Upanishad' to its place on the national emblem, Krishna touches upon a dizzying array of subjects: the mother cult in the freedom struggle, the nuances of the 'Kamban Ramayana', the Right to Information movement, honour killings, and the crisis of state violence.

He wears his immense erudition lightly. Each digression is handled with clarity, always serving the overarching argument about truth, its pursuit, and its suppression in contemporary India.

This back-and-forth between the philosophical and the political, the historical and the hyper-contemporary, is the book's greatest strength. It forces the reader into

a rewarding revision of both India's past and its present. One can, and should, argue with Krishna's readings. This reviewer, for instance, wished he had trained his critical eye on the unofficial stereotypes, like the conflation of Indianness with Hindi or vegetarianism, that often act as more potent gatekeepers of identity than the official symbols themselves.

Yet, the book's immense value lies in its positiveness of intent. Its most endearing quality is its refusal to shy away from hard questions. Krishna does not offer easy pieties. Instead, he owns up to the principles behind his positions, forcing the reader to reckon with their own idea of India. In an era of aggressive nationalism, the collection is a timely reminder that the republic's symbols were never meant to be mere badges of obedience, but invitations to a continuous, critical, and hopeful conversation about who we are and who we want to become.

— *The reviewer teaches history at the Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences, Bhubaneswar*

REFLECTIONS

CHANDIGARH | 22 FEBRUARY 2026

Hypocrisy has no boundaries



PRADEEP MAGAZINE

IN the end it was, to quote Shakespeare, "like a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing". In this battle of bullets camouflaged as a contest between bat and ball, no one has an idea of what the endgame is, except of course to satisfy the greed of those who love the whirring, rustling sound of the cash-counting machine.

Was it all worth the energy expended to put the broken pieces of egoistic minds together and have the match finally take place? There was a time when an India-Pakistan match, even if it did not often produce a riveting contest, showcased extraordinary skills on both sides. From a cricketing perspective, it is sad to see the once formidable Pakistan reduced to a team of nervous, bumbling players, lost like fearful children in a gathering of bullying adults.

In a World Cup full of surprises and exciting possibilities that might be forcing the die-hard traditionalists to reassess their dislike for the T20 format, the India-Pakistan off-field theatrics are a distasteful reminder of how not to mix sports with politics. The manner in which smaller, newer nations have embraced this format and are even challenging established teams reaffirms fears for Test cricket's survival. When Nepal can nearly stun England, the United States almost defuse India's batting explosion and Zimbabwe become the giant slayers, it is obvious there is no Goliath in the T20 world.

Elite Test-playing nations for long have, in vain, searched for countries which could expand their limited numbers. Its failure to spread could, among many reasons, also have to do with its intricate skills that take time and a proper cricketing culture to master.

From the 1970s onwards, it was believed that where Test cricket failed, the 50-over game would succeed. Though it did narrow the gulf and allowed "mediocre" teams to compete, the core has remained almost untouched, Afghanistan being the rare exception. T20 has literally revolutionised not just the way cricket is played, but also ignited the imagination of countries which would be an embarrassment in Test cricket's draining, energy-sapping battle of skill and attrition.

An epithet for our times could read: Impetuosity is a virtue, patience a vice. Patience and skilful vigil at the crease were the twin pillars on which a traditional Test batsman would prosper. He was trained to rein in his impulsive streak, bide his time and construct an innings like a mason who has to build a castle, not fix a door knob.

We are fine with playing against Pakistan, doing commentary together, helping broadcasters and the teams rake in money but please, no official handshake on the field

The T20 batsman has been provided with a racing track and given a gear-less car to drive. There are no road bumps, no hazards to negotiate. He has a licence to thrill and go for the kill. Better imagery would be of a person holding a machine gun or even more lethal, the Metalstorm to fire from. It is a volcanic burst which has dazzled a vast number of "fearless" youth and lured "bored" adults into its addictive embrace.

The shrinking of a sport designed to last five days to just three-and-a-half hours playing time has turned the grammar of cricket upside down. The 360° swinging bats, the vanishing

defensive prods, the scoops and reverse sweeps, ramp ups, the deliberate edges that race towards the boundaries — it is mayhem out there. To counter this fusillade, the bowlers are inventing new methods of deception and deceit. The finger flicks, the knuckle balls, the side-on release, the subtle pause and the speed variations are among the many methods being used in the hope of chaining the batter. To survive, the bowler needs to be a sorcerer or face imminent demise.

With cricket being played at a frenzied pace and the world warming up to it, was it necessary for India and Pakistan to create a churlish drama of its own on the field? I admire Suryakumar Yadav the batter and his mobile face that would be a thespian's delight. He contracts and stretches his face, flattens his forehead, occasionally even rolls out his tongue with eyes popping out in an unrestrained display of a sea of emotions.

It does not behove an Indian captain of such endearing qualities to display a streak of boorishness and refuse to shake hands with his rival captain. To walk away from an established tradition is disquieting, disturbing and shows a complete lack of sporting manners. What was India trying to prove by repeating an act done during its three matches in the Asia Cup played a few months back?

While Yadav, probably under instructions, was avoiding the gaze of Pakistan's captain during the toss and the teams didn't line up for handshakes, India's former captain and an icon of the game, Rohit Sharma, was captured by the cameras hugging Pakistani legend Wasim Akram. It was a gesture symbolic of two human beings greeting each other in the warmth of good faith.

We are fine with playing against you, fine with former Indian and Pakistani legends doing commentary together, laughing and smiling at each other's jokes, helping broadcasters and both teams rake in money but please, no official handshake on the ground. Hypocrisy has no limits, no boundaries.

— *The writer is the author of 'Not Quite Cricket' and 'Not Just Cricket'*

What it means to have a dog in the family



RAAJA BHASIN

AROUND New Year, there is a slew of horoscopic posts and no astrological sign is left out, or singled out, or spared. There are blanket predictions of rosy love lives and overflowing wealth for all and sundry. This is wonderful considering there are approximately 8.3 billion people on the planet where almost all of them desire, among other things, rosy love lives and an abundance of wealth. Of course, the lives of some are rosier than others, Mr Epstein and his ever-widening circle notwithstanding. But be that as it may. These hard-wearing predictions carry on till Valentine's Day when love forecasts and rainbow predictions reach a crescendo and ably assist the market of the lovelorn.

While the elements and stars may well combine to create our lives, Chinese astrological signs are based on animals. This is the year of the Fire Horse that comes once in 60 years. It is supposed to bring intense changes on the personal and global levels.

Those who read the signs say that it is a paradoxical year that can bring great success, but can become challenging should one err and not embrace the demands it will bring.

As per the Chinese system, some are born, among others, in the years of the ox, rabbit, dragon, snake, pig or rat. I happen to have been born in the year of the rat. And should things become unpleasant, it is well known that rats are the first to desert a sinking ship.

But let's turn back to love for a moment, minus Valentine's Day and all those misty predictions. It does not have to be human love. Nor love of, or for, the Divine. It has been well said that you've never truly loved till you've loved an animal. There have been remarkable cases like those of Jim Corbett and 'Billy' Arjan Singh; the latter let big cats like leopards and tigers roam freely around his house. Romulus Whitaker has done exceptional work in the conservation of snakes and crocodiles. These examples of conservation and perhaps, of love, are beyond the capability and comprehension of 'rats' like me. We settle for pets like dogs and cats. And if we have it in us, we give them love that is as unconditional as what we may receive.

When our last dog died, I did not want to get one again. She was a gorgeous Tibetan terrier who, with her long hair and considerable attitude, lived and controlled us for a full 17 years. At one time, the little son of a friend came by and took a look at her basket of playthings — a chewed-up bone, a few balls, a battered plastic soap dish and her favourite, a rag that she chased. Appreciative of the collection, he asked: "I have seen her toys, where are her books?"

It was her routine around which the household revolved. My father took



Somehow, I don't like the phrase 'dog/pet parent', nor do I care much for the word 'owner'. But, honestly, I don't have a substitute for either

her for the morning walk, and I did the evening one. Then, one day, my wife and I had gone out and on our return, our young son opened the door and said that our dog was lying on the kitchen floor and not getting up. She was still breathing. I picked her and she died in my lap. That death impacted me as much as that of any humans one has loved and lost.

It is after several years that we have a dog again. The family has pre-empted me. I was in another town and one evening was sent the picture of a small puppy. "Very nice," was my casual and rather unthinking reply. "But why are you sending this?" "He is the latest addition to the family," I was informed. And that was that.

Some months back, the little chap arrived in the hills and took it upon himself to overhaul the household's daily routine and alter it to his requirements. No more late mornings and no more travelling whenever you want.

He is also making his presence known. In our neighbourhood is a small girl who comes by regularly to ask for him. She plays with him and now, recites him poems that she has learnt at school; this is done, approximately, to the rhythm of his wagging tail. She has asked if I am 'his Papa', and well, one might as well accept that role with a modicum of grace. This is a moment when affection pushes biology aside.

The puppy is approaching his full size and is of a rather lean and active breed. I have been accosted and asked if we don't feed him enough as he is so skinny.

Somehow, I don't like the phrase 'dog/pet parent', nor do I care much for the word 'owner'. But, honestly, I don't have a substitute for either.

— *The writer is an author based in Shimla*

Gen Bhagat and the Sikh LI uniform

ASHOK AHLAWAT

TWO gorgeous colours — 'bunting yellow' and 'flame of the forest' — are part of the uniform of the Sikh Light Infantry regiment. The story of these colours being chosen for the Sikh LI is related to a titan of the Indian Army, Lt Gen Premindra Singh (Prem) Bhagat, VC.

As a young officer, Prem Bhagat of Bombay Sappers, an engineers' group of the Army, found himself bound for East Africa at the beginning of World War II. Thereafter, in the Battle of Keren, the engineering detachment under his command fought alongside Sikh troops of the Frontier Force Rifles. For his valour, Bhagat was awarded the Victoria Cross.

He had Sikh troops in his engineer detachment also. Prem Bhagat held Sikh troops in very high esteem.

Great courage is often buttressed by a greatly developed sense of humour. As a Gentleman Cadet in the Indian Military Academy, Bhagat's dossier report read: "This GC has too high an opinion of himself, he always wears his uniform peak cap at a rakish angle, against dress regulations."

For this misdemeanour, Bhagat was brought in front of the Academy adjutant, that time a British officer:

"Young man, you always wear your cap wrongly, how do you justify your action?" he asked. "Sir, I like wearing my cap like this



As Colonel of Sikh LI regiment, Gen Bhagat decided to infuse colour into the uniform. MANAS RANJAN BHUI

only," replied Bhagat. "Only the Prince of Wales has the privilege of wearing his cap at this angle," said the adjutant. "Sir, I am no less than the Prince of Wales," replied GC Bhagat.

In early 1945, Capt Prem Bhagat was sent to do the Staff Course at Camberley in United Kingdom. Here, the Deputy Commandant of the Staff College, who had never been to India and knew nothing about Indian Army officers, asked him apprehensively and very slowly, "Bhagat, do you know any English?"

Capt Bhagat replied very slowly, copying the manner of the British officer: "Know a leetle beet Eenglees."

After a few days, Bhagat's turn came to deliver a lecture as a student officer. The

Deputy Commandant, being the chief instructor, was also in attendance. Bhagat gave a lecture in fluent English. The Deputy Commandant was both angry and smiling.

Sometime in 1966, the officers of the Sikh LI regiment requested him to be Colonel of the Regiment. Gen Bhagat happily agreed.

As Colonel of the Sikh LI regiment, Gen Bhagat observed that the uniform was rather drab and dull for such a lively and brave regiment. He decided to infuse some colour.

One day, while motoring from Lucknow to Dehradun, with his aide de camp, Maj Raikar, they crossed a vast stretch of road covered with 'flame of the forest' trees in full bloom. It was an enchanting sight. Gen Bhagat decided that this was the colour well suited for the Sikh Light Infantry, along with 'bunting yellow' and the war bugle symbol.

Lt Gen Bhagat remained the Honorary Colonel of the regiment for life.

As the IMA Commandant, it was Gen Bhagat who started the custom of inviting the parents of the passing-out Gentlemen Cadets for the pipping ceremony and of throwing Commandant's dinner for them.

In an address to GCs of a passing-out course, he summed up the essence of being an Army officer: "Do nothing selfish, petty or mean. Be magnanimous, be loyal, be courageous and always be a gentleman. You will then be an officer in the true sense."

— *Now retired from the Army, Ahlawat has penned four books on life in the armed forces*

Why compassion runs deeper than benevolence or kindness

THERE are several human values and moral virtues we tend to club together with compassion, such as mercy, kindness, benevolence, service, charity and love. Even though all of them can help you become a better human being, it is important to note that they stem from different sources and have varied impacts. Unlike virtues and values, which are often constructed and derived externally, compassion is inborn, innate and natural.

Mercy and benevolence may seem similar to compassion; they can benefit others and bring you joy and contentment, as well as respect and recognition. But compassion runs deeper. It is that powerful and natural force that transforms not just your personal life but your immediate surroundings and the world. Acts of mercy are often sporadic and spontaneous. You can choose to spend your money or take time out from your busy schedule to help someone in need, but you do not try to eliminate the social, political or systemic causes of their suffering.

The hungry person you feed today is satiated for the day and the warm clothes you gave a homeless person could help them survive a cold winter. Still, a single act of mercy

does little to lessen their vulnerabilities.

Additionally, the relationship between the giver and the recipient of a merciful act is defined by a noticeable hierarchy, in which the former is placed above the latter. Conversely, compassion maintains a relationship of mutual respect and dignity. All of us are already capable of compassion, it only needs to be ignited.

Though its makeup is similar to mercy, kindness can have a wider scope. It is reflected in a person's everyday behaviour and actions. Acts of kindness, like mercy, can help provide momentary comfort to those in trouble. Also, even the kindest people may not be free of an inherent desire for recognition, which motivates them to act.

This can be demonstrated through an amusing Persian folktale.

There once lived a kind and cheerful man named Mullah Nasruddin who was widely respected for his generosity. Nasruddin was also known to be fond of his clothes. Once, his friend, a poet, was invited to recite *ghazals* at a *mushaira*. The poet asked Nasruddin if he could borrow a pair of trousers. Nasruddin gave the finest trousers he owned. When his friend took the stage, Nasruddin asked



some acquaintances what they thought of the trousers the poet was wearing. When someone remarked that they were stunning, Nasruddin proudly said they were his. On their way home, the poet told Nasruddin he felt embarrassed by the disclosure.

When the poet was invited to another *mushaira*, he again asked Nasruddin to accompany him. When speaking to some members of the audience, Nasruddin praised the trousers the poet was wearing but added they were not his. The poet again implored his friend not to mention the

trousers again. On Nasruddin's assurance, the poet took him to a third *mushaira*. This time, Nasruddin drew attention to the trousers by saying he'd never reveal their owner. Exasperated, the poet publicly removed the trousers and returned them.

In comparison to kindness, the effects of benevolence are felt for longer. There is a story in the *Mahabharata* that illustrates the difference between benevolent and compassionate deeds.

Having won the battle of Kurukshetra, King Yudhishtira organised a celebratory feast. Thousands of people, from princes to paupers, participated. They enjoyed the delicious spread of food and were rewarded with gifts. Suddenly, Yudhishtira spotted a mongoose. Half of its skin was golden. The mongoose began rolling around where the religious rituals had been performed.

Yudhishtira asked, 'What are you doing?' The mongoose replied, 'I'm trying to turn the remaining half of my body golden.' Seeing that Yudhishtira was still perplexed, the mongoose explained:

'A few days ago, I came upon a tiny hut. I could see a poor family of four — a middle-aged man, his wife, son and daughter-in-law

— getting ready for dinner. Four plates were neatly arranged on the floor. The wife said she only had enough wheat to make one *roti*. Just as she had served them a quarter each of the *roti*, a hungry stranger approached their door. The middle-aged man invited him and gave the man his share. The other three did the same. The grateful stranger ate all four pieces and left. When the family had fallen asleep, I entered the hut and began rolling on the spot where a few *roti* crumbs had fallen. That's when half my body turned golden. I thought that rolling on the spot where a righteous king like you had performed a sacrifice would turn the rest of my body golden but, sadly, that did not happen.'

Though both Yudhishtira and the family had fed the hungry, the King had expected his benevolence would earn him good *karma*, while the family had acted out of compassion, thinking of the stranger's hunger as their own. In compassionate action, there is no expectation of any form of reward. Service, unlike kindness and benevolence, comes closer to compassion.

— *Satyarthi was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2014. Excerpted from 'Karuna, The Power of Compassion' (HarperCollins)*

WHEN Rohtak BURNT

Bhartesh Singh Thakur travels to the epicentre of the Jat quota stir violence that shook Haryana 10 years ago

ANARCHY—there is no other word to describe what Haryana witnessed in February 2016. The widespread rioting and violence across the BJP-ruled state left scars that continue to haunt. The terrifying events are still fresh in the minds of the victims. As the protesters went on a frenzy of destruction to demand reservation for Jats in government jobs, the police and civil administration were accused of being bystanders, failing to intervene.

According to the Prakash Singh Committee report, property worth ₹20,000 crore was destroyed; 30 people, including 20 rioters, were killed. Now, several cases are facing closure without the accused being taken to task.

Prakash Singh, the former UP DGP, told *The Tribune*, “If they (Haryana Police) are filing untraced reports (in cases), it implies there must be a signal from the government to avoid prosecution. We did our job. It was up to the government to take action against the police and civil administration officers. If they don’t, and God forbid if a similar situation arises, the same thing will happen.”

“The violence did divert attention from the reservation demand. Besides, the Supreme Court ruling also sealed the fate of reservation,” says Hawa Singh Sangwan, who led the Akhil Bhartiya Jat Aarakshan Sangharsh Samiti faction during the agitation.

LIBRARY UP IN FLAMES

PANCH DEV has been guarding the gates of Shiksha Bharti Senior Secondary School in Rohtak for 26 years now. He was on duty on the night of February 19, 2016, too.

“It was around 9.45 pm. A mob came in a tractor-trolley. They carried axes, sticks and iron rods. The main gate was locked and too high to scale, so they brought a ladder, climbed over, broke the lock from inside and opened the gate,” recalls Dev, now 47.

They beat him up and did not spare his nine-year-old son, Amit. “Then one of them said, ‘Leave him, he is a *mazdoor* (labourer),’” says Dev.

The mob set five school buses ablaze and torched the projector hall. Even the child’s bicycle was burnt.

Dev managed to inform principal Sanjay

Kumar. A teacher somehow reached the campus and took Amit away. Dev spent the night hiding in the nearby wheat fields.

The following day, February 20, the school was attacked again. Around 12.30 pm, nearly 200-250 rioters stormed the premises, armed with flaming sticks and petrol bombs. More buses were burnt. The generator, the principal’s office, clerical offices, the music room and the library were set on fire.

Neither the police nor the fire brigade arrived despite frantic calls for help.

The library — with nearly 6,000 books, including religious texts — was reduced to ashes. Principal Sanjay Kumar and social science teacher Jitender Chawla drew water from the overhead tank using pipes, trying desperately to douse the flames. “I was also in charge of the March examinations,” says Chawla. “I rushed to check the students’ records. The glass panes were shattered, but the records were untouched. Perhaps, because their own children study here.”

The school caters largely to students from the nearby Jat-dominated villages. In the aftermath, computers, files and laboratory equipment were hurriedly moved in a tractor-trolley to the house of a local Jat farmer, Jabbar Singh, whose children studied at the school. His daughter later joined the Military Nursing Service as a Lieutenant; his son became a doctor.

Five to seven days later, teachers cleaned the charred library themselves and donated books from their personal collections. Today, the library holds close to 3,000 books.

The estimated loss exceeded ₹3 crore. Though the government provided partial compensation, the school was largely rebuilt through collective effort. Teachers and staff contributed from their salaries. The management took loans.

Today, besides a new fleet of buses, the campus has an additional administrative block, along with a multipurpose hall that doubles as an auditorium and games venue.

The Prakash Singh Committee report noted: “A total of 94 police personnel were deployed in the area of Police Station Sadar Rohtak. No force was used against the agitators, and the police personnel did not respond to distress calls from the school.”

The police later filed an untraced report. No arrests were made in the case. On October 15, 2025, a Rohtak court accepted the report.

SON'S LOSS

FOR years, taxi driver Surender Kumar did not display a photograph of his deceased son at home. Only a couple of years ago did his daughter bring it out on Raksha Bandhan.

On February 20, 2016, as rioters vandalised shops and government buildings in Rohtak city, Kumar and his 17-year-old son Nitin set out for Quilla Road to help a relative move goods to safety. Before they could reach, a



The Tribune edition dated February 22, 2016.

mob armed with rods and sticks surged from Shantmai Chowk and began attacking shops. Father and son ran in different directions and were separated. Army and police



Nitin (17) was shot by armed attackers.

rushed him to hospital. He died on the way. “Nothing was left... it was all finished,” Kumar says quietly. “I was told he walked a few steps after being shot.”

Nitin had been preparing for his Class 10 exams. “He was the youngest, but more mature than my elder son.”

“I have only one regret,” he says. “Had the security personnel intervened, my son would have been saved. February 20 was a day of devastation.”

The police filed an untraced report in the case. It was accepted on December 6, 2025. The court observed that the file would not be destroyed and must be reopened

if the accused were ever apprehended.

NOTHING WAS LEFT

ON February 19, 2016, Scholars Rosary School in Bohar, Rohtak, was first ransacked around 7.30 pm. A second, far more violent attack followed the next afternoon. Hundreds of rioters gathered outside.

“The steel gate was locked, but the force of hundreds pushing at once flung it open,” recalls Ravinder Kaushik from the school administration. “They shoved me aside and ran amok.” He says the mob threatened to burn him alive if he intervened.

Twenty-five buses were torched. The reception, computer room, library, cafeteria and records were set ablaze. LPG cylinders were piled together and ignited. “There was a blast,” Kaushik remembers.

Despite repeated calls, neither the police nor fire tenders came.

Several blocks were destroyed. “They ensured nothing was left,” says Principal Preeti Gugnani. “They gathered almirahs, records, computers and furniture into a heap and set it on fire.”

The loss was estimated at ₹20 crore. As violence engulfed the city, a few Jat teachers and their husbands stayed with

Gugnani’s family for protection. “Punjabis were being targeted. We feared our homes would be attacked. We sat indoors with our valuables. It felt like Partition stories our ancestors had told were coming alive.”

When she visited the school three days later, Gugnani was shattered. “I kept asking myself, what wrong had we done?”

Yet the rebuilding began. More than 100 teachers offered to work without salary. Parents assured her of their support. Loans were taken. The state government provided compensation. “I realised human resources are a greater asset than physical assets,” Gugnani says. A wooden plaque on her desk reads: *Everything is Possible if You Believe.*

Today, the school boasts of air-conditioned classrooms, a cafeteria, upgraded blocks, a restored library and computer rooms. It now runs three times as many buses as in 2016. The family has since opened another school.

The Prakash Singh Committee report stated: “A total of 66 police personnel were deployed in the area of Police Station Urban Estate. No force was used to disperse the agitators. The police did not go to the spot.”

An untraced report was filed in this case as well. On December 13, 2025, a Rohtak court accepted it, observing that the FIR was lodged against unknown offenders and neither the accused nor the stolen property had been recovered.



Scholars Rosary School in Bohar, Rohtak, after it was set ablaze in 2016 and (below) a renovated block of the school.



Surajkund Mela tragedy calls for urgent measures to clamp down on unsafe rides and parks

Why a model law on safe rides is essential for all states

PUSHPA GIRIMAJI

THE horrific crash of an amusement ride at the Surajkund International Crafts Mela on February 7, resulting in the death of an Inspector and injuries to 14 persons, is a grim reminder of the absence of focused regulatory oversight to ensure the safety of these rides in the country.

Ironically, Surajkund Mela had witnessed a similar tragedy exactly a quarter of a century ago when a giant swing ride malfunctioned and overturned, sending many riders tumbling down, some of them from a height of over 30 feet. Four people had died and a dozen were injured on that fateful day of February 11, 2001. Obviously, no lessons in safety were learnt from that tragedy.

In fact, last fortnight’s mishap is a sad reflection of the absence of a safety culture and a lack of accountability in governance. How can the organisers allow someone to bring such substandard rides, putting at risk the lives of users?

The ride owner and supplier have been arrested following the tragedy, but what about those officials who hired them or gave them permission to run the rides? How come we have heard nothing about that

investigation and subsequent action? The fair is organised by the Surajkund Mela Authority and Haryana Tourism, in collaboration with the Union ministries of tourism, textile, culture and external affairs. How is it that such a prestigious fair allowed rides without adequate safety checks? As consumers, we need answers to these questions.

The nature and the frequency of these man-made disasters raise serious concerns over the safety of consumers and call for urgent measures to clamp down on all unsafe rides and parks.

Last month, a Columbus swing installed at a mela in Madhya Pradesh’s Jhabua district snapped while descending at great speed, injuring 14 school children. On October 24 last year, 18 people were trapped on a tower ride at about 80 feet above the ground for several hours at an amusement fair in Kolhapur, Maharashtra. On May 27, a thrill ride called ‘Top Gun’, which ascends vertically before plunging down at full speed, stalled at its peak height at VGP Universal Kingdom in Chennai, leaving 36 people stranded for hours. On April 2, a 24-year-old woman died after a fall from a great height while enjoying a roller-coaster ride at Fun and Food village in Delhi. The cause was



Consumer courts should be more sensitive to human suffering and quantify compensation more generously. FILE

the breakage of a component of the ride.

Gujarat perhaps is the only state that has brought about reforms in this area, with comprehensive rules to regulate amusement parks, rides and gaming zones. Following the massive fire at the Rajkot Game Zone that killed 27 people on May 25, 2024, the Gujarat High Court took up the issue suo motu and forced the government to

come up with a legislation to regulate them. The Kankaria Adventure Park tragedy in Ahmedabad also focused attention on the need for an exclusive law to regulate amusement parks. On July 13, 2019, two persons died and 29 were seriously injured following the collapse of a pendulum ride at the park.

The Gujarat Amusement Rides and Gaming Zone Activities Safety Rules, 2024, to be notified by district magistrates, incorporate the Indian Standards formulated by the Bureau of Indian Standards for the safety of amusement rides. The rules also mandate verification and inspection of rides by the Ride Safety and Inspection Committee constituted by the licensing authority — district magistrate. It stipulates compulsory reporting of all adverse incidents to the licensing authority, third party liability insurance cover, and certification of safety by chartered engineers.

The Haryana government is also now promising a regulation on similar lines.

Given the gravity of the situation, the Union government should immediately draft a comprehensive model law for all states to adopt. This would also ensure uniformity in the laws of states. Such a law should also incorporate a no-fault liability

clause so that in case of ride malfunctions, the victims get compensation without requiring proof of operator negligence.

Several orders of the consumer courts throw light on the gravity of the injuries that these rides can inflict, if not built and maintained to exacting standards. In *Aditya Bhati vs Rizvana Amusement* (August 13, 2015), the consequence of the breakage of a chair during a ride at a Dasehra mela in Greater Noida was such that it resulted in severe head injuries to Aditya, affecting his brain, speech and movement. That ride completely changed the course of his life. The apex consumer court awarded ₹45 lakh.

Varsha Arhanth vs Sammy Dreamland and *Padmaraj Doddamani vs Sammy Dreamland* refer to the collapse of the hydraulic-controlled ‘parachute ride’ in 2004 at Sammy Dreamland amusement park in Bengaluru, resulting in serious injuries to 13 riders. Of them, while Varsha suffered paraplegia, Padmaraj suffered spinal injury and paralysis. In all such cases, I do feel that consumer courts should be more sensitive to human suffering and quantify compensation more generously.

— The writer is a consumer rights & safety expert

Aye for AI, but some fear too



ACROSS THE AISLE
BY P CHIDAMBARAM

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) is here. It is true that AI will multiply manifold human capabilities and productivity. India has a huge and growing wealth of human resources (at least until 2050). However, its quality is significantly different from the human resources of developed countries. In a developed country, practically everyone is school-educated and a great proportion is college-educated. There is an opportunity for life-long learning and acquiring new skills. In India, the demographic dividend comes with demographic burdens. While school enrolment at primary level is very high, there is a decline, at every stage, in enrolment at upper primary, secondary and higher secondary levels. Gross Enrolment Ratio in higher education is between 45-50%. Most college-enrolled students acquire an undergraduate degree that does not make them 'skilled' or 'employable' — the main reason why it is an onerous task for young men and women to find suitable jobs.

'F' for future, also fear

I have read a summary of Mr Darío

Amodei's (CEO, Anthropic) copyrighted 38-page essay 'The Adolescence of Technology'. On economic disruption, he says that AI could disrupt labour markets at 'unprecedented speed and across wide occupational categories, potentially displacing a significant portion of jobs, especially white-collar work *in the near term*'. It is scary. Another study in India found that AI recognises caste. If humans have taught caste-bias to AI, it is scarier.

Hon'ble prime minister is right that AI will open the doors to the future and fortune. But there is also fear that jobs will be lost. Routine and repetitive jobs such as ticket issuers and checkers, bus and train conductors, rail signal persons, traffic police officers, stenographers and typists, tourist guides, translators, lab technicians, bank tellers, private tutors, etc may vanish. Microsoft's CEO said that many tasks in white collar jobs will be automated. The company axed thousands of jobs in 2025. Tata Consultancy Services announced in 2025 that it would 'let go' of more than 12,000 employees as part of a restructuring exercise. Mr Vinod Khosla predicted that AI could eliminate IT services and BPO firms could almost disappear within the next five years.

India's biggest problem is lack of jobs. The current 'official' unemployment rate is 5.1 per cent, but we know it is more. Youth unemployment rate is 15 per cent. About 55 per cent of the 'employed' are self-employed or in casual labour. In the prosperous regions, agriculture operations are already mechanised. Rural families disguise unemployment with the excuse that the young man or woman is 'self-employed'. If urban

If AI will do all our work, and bring prosperity to all, what will humans do? While the impact of AI unfolds during the next few years, it is time to ponder the question

blue-collar jobs too become scarce, and joblessness spreads to educated youth in 'skilled' sectors such as Information Technology and IT products/services, the situation will become explosive.

How ready is India and the world to tackle the inevitable challenges? As far as I gather, the world including India is not yet ready with solutions. The Chief Economic Adviser (CEA) drew a distinction between the impact of AI on advanced economies (*facing demographic decline, AI may be a plus*) and developing countries (*AI will be a stress test for state capacity*). Naturally, the solutions will be different. His solution is that "*relentless execution could help India become the first large society... to align technological adoption with mass employability*." I wish the solution was so simple.

Difficult measures

The early results of relentless adoption of technology are reduction in jobs, at least in Indian factories. But there is time, as the *Economist* says, between "invention and diffusion", and to take the hard measures that will absorb the impact of technological adoption. For example, given the vast numbers of job-seekers and jobs, India must be prepared to:

- Recognise that, unlike developed countries, India is required to create a *variety* of jobs for the youth who may drop out at upper primary, secondary or higher secondary levels of school;
- Separate, at the higher secondary level, the academic stream and the non-academic stream of students based on ap-

titude and merit;

- Close the numerous 'pass' courses in non-science subjects and channel the students to post-graduate education, STEM or skilling courses;
- Massively invest in education, health-care and environment management;
- Develop local/regional markets that will produce and consume quality goods and services supported by local or regional banks, and not be obsessed with Big business, Big markets, Big chains and Big banks;
- Acknowledge that, in the present day, MSMEs are the biggest job creators in India. If AI can help MSMEs — as promised by the Minister of Information Technology — MSMEs will be able to create more jobs. The CEA has noted that India needs to create "at least 80 lakh jobs every year." The required number will be more; and
- Require those who will adopt AI and, resultantly, destroy jobs, to create an *equal* number of jobs. We don't have to agree with Mr Jamie Dimon (CEO, JP Morgan Chase) and ban 'lay-offs'. Corporate Social Responsibility has infused a degree of social responsibility in businesses; that must include job-creating responsibility.

Dystopian Future

A world without jobs, or fewer jobs, will stare at a dystopian future. 'Work' defines a human. No other living creature works voluntarily except to hunt for food. If AI will do *all* our work, and bring prosperity to *all*, what will humans do? While the impact of AI unfolds during the next few years, it is time to ponder the question.

Artificial intelligence, real hubris



FIFTH COLUMN
BY TAVLEEN SINGH

IT HAPPENS that I watched the AI Impact Summit from a small seaside village in Maharashtra. This gave me a chance to view things from a different perspective. And time to experiment with the only AI I use. I asked ChatGPT to write a column on the summit in my writing style. It took less than a minute to write a piece that I could well have written. Here is a sample sentence. "The danger is not that we are talking about AI. The danger is that we may begin to believe our own rhetoric." Not bad at all.

It shames me not one bit to admit that ChatGPT pre-empted the piece that you are about to read. There is no question that Narendra Modi pulled off a spectacular success with his AI summit, but we need to be wary about getting too carried away by this. We in India have kind of missed the AI bus while our old enemy China has not only ridden on it but is, along with the United States, driving it. While we in our beloved motherland were busy unleashing a wave of Hindutva vigilantism, the Chinese were busy inventing their own version of AI at a much lower cost than the Americans. So, before we start pretending that we can become the voice of the Global South, we should pay attention to how China has already become that voice.

At the summit in Delhi there was much talk of how India can adjust new technologies to our own needs and offer them to the world at a much lower price. But the question we need to ask is, what has prevented us from already developing Indian versions of AI? Was it a lack of funds that stopped us from competing in this new world? Was it something else? It is to Modi's credit that he realised some time ago that India could not ignore this magnificent and dangerous new technology. In doing this he did better than prime ministers of yore who ignored such transformative technologies as computers, satellite TV and cellphones until they sneaked up on us and changed everything. The Congress Party should have kept this in mind before unleashing its protestors into the AI summit to cause disruption and embarrassment.

But ChatGPT spoke for me when it warned that we should not 'start believing our own rhetoric.' With all the promises of investment made at the summit we still have a very long way to travel on a road that has obstacles and mysteries around every corner. The experts tell us that AI can make an extraordinary difference in the fields of education and healthcare. This is certainly true but in vast tracts of India the basics do not exist for this to happen. AI uses more electricity than other technologies so how will things work out in rural India where electricity is unreliable at best and unavailable at worst?

The experts tell us that schoolchildren will be able to use AI for tuitions when teachers are absent. In the village where I am writing this piece there is a government school in which no computer has ever found its way. The schoolhouse is a tumbledown old cottage whose roof leaks when the rains come. There are two teachers who are responsible for teaching every subject from science and mathematics to literature and social studies. The village has a private school that is better. But the level of teaching is so low that children leave school barely able to read and count. In the thirty years that I have come to this village I have seen no improvement in the schools.

If somebody gets sick in the village they must go to the nearest small town to find a doctor. Serious health problems require going to Mumbai which is more than a hundred kilometers away. Water in the village is hard to find and electricity is whimsical. If conditions are like this in rural Maharashtra just think what things are like in rural parts of Bihar or Uttar Pradesh. I have visited schools in these states in which children sit on bare, mud floors and come to school only for the midday meal. At the risk of repeating what I have said often in this column: Modi's biggest failure has been that he has not ordered his chief ministers to concentrate on rectifying those fundamental flaws in the model of governance that they inherited from decades of Congress rule.

If AI can do what humans have failed to, then we need to embrace it with open arms and ensure that it spreads rapidly across rural India where it is needed more than in the cities. But before that happens, we need to build the infrastructure it requires to be able to make a difference. So, it is terrific that the Prime Minister managed to organise such a successful AI Impact summit and in doing so make clear that India is open for business. Now what he needs to do is whip his chief ministers into doing what they should have been doing for the past decade. Sad to say they have mostly wasted their time on things of no consequence and on enjoying the fruits of power.

To quote again from that sentence written by my new best friend ChatGPT, we are already in danger of 'believing our own rhetoric.'

In Bangladesh, strains from the past shape its present



INSIDE TRACK | BY COOMI KAPOOR

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

The publication of the banquet menu at Rashtrapati Bhavan for the President of Seychelles has triggered a debate as to whether it is appropriate for the Indian government to serve distinguished foreign visitors fanciful but sparse vegetarian fare only. Confirming a senior journalist's claim that visiting dignitaries routinely return from banquets at Rashtrapati Bhavan and Hyderabad House and order food at their hotels, Mahua Moitra claimed that French President Emmanuel Macron requested bread, cheese and cold cuts in his room after a G20 summit banquet highlighting millets (*bajra*). Should good hosts impose their dietary fancies on their guests? And is it smart diplomacy to send our foreign guests home on an empty stomach? Those accustomed to hearty meals of roasts, steaks, pies, and a succession of succulent dishes find the airy-fairy, nouvelle cuisine vegetarian fares served of late at our official banquets hard to swallow. (Even vegetarians complain of the unfamiliar dishes.) At the Seychelles president's dinner, the main course was simply potatoes cooked Gujarati style, roasted brinjals, spiced paneer and mushrooms. Descriptions of pickles were included in the menu card to disguise the paucity of dishes. The menu writer waxed even more eloquent for the AI Summit dinner hosted by the PM last week, where the main course of *rajma, chawal* and *bajra* was described in lyrical language!

The late foreign correspondent M V Kamath had traced Richard Nixon's animosity towards India to an indifferent vegetarian meal hosted by Morarji Desai when Desai was finance minister and Nixon out of power. Nixon was to compare the spartan Indian meal most unfavourably with the lavish spreads laid out for him in Pakistan. It is pertinent to point out that normally foreign governments courteously offer vegetarian options for Indian guests, but also keep the tastes of other diners in mind. As the old proverb goes, the way to a man's heart is through his stomach.

WRESTLING DEBATE

When Rahul Gandhi began his Lok Sabha speech on the Budget, the faces of senior Congress leaders reflected their anxiety. Instead of taking up the topic at hand, Gandhi began with a discourse on the martial arts. Congress MPs were relieved to discover that their unorthodox leader was explaining about jiu-jitsu grips, chokes, taps and surrender as an analogy to the alleged strangeness of the US government over Prime Minister Modi. Gandhi does not hide his love for the martial arts. In January, at a closed door training camp in Kurukshetra, Haryana, Gandhi, wearing traditional judo gear, was accompanied by his professional instructor. Both exhibited some agile manoeuvres for the stunned audience of district Congress committee chiefs and party functionaries. Gandhi explained that in politics, if the opponent tries to overpower and pin them down, they should tactfully keep rolling out without allowing the enemy to overpower them. His message was that those who master martial arts emerge stronger in politics. Last year, Rahul informed a senior leader that he was planning martial arts camps for teenagers in major cities. Some party leaders view the proposal as a smart move to galvanise youth and counter RSS training camps. But sceptics question whether politics and jiu-jitsu are in fact an ideal match.

MYSTERIOUS SUPPORT

Assam CM Himanta Biswa Sarma was pulled up by the BJP high command for the AI generated video on X showing Sarma targeting Muslims. As damage control, the Assam BJP media co-convenor was sacked and the party chief spokesperson in Delhi disowned the post. The central leadership's rebuke of one of its favourite CMs was more about electoral concerns than ethics. BJP election strategists apprehended that the offending video could result in the state's approximately 36% Muslims uniting in backing the Congress to defeat the BJP. Interestingly, post the video, four teams of maulanās have visited Muslim dominated areas in Assam. Their theme is that if Asaduddin Owaisi could successfully mobilise minority votes in Maharashtra and Bihar, an Assamese Muslim leader could do the same in the state. Their message suggested that minorities should vote for Badruddin Ajmal, a Muslim businessman-politician accused of splitting the Muslim vote. Ajmal, however, while thanking the campaign teams for their efforts, claims he has no clue where his supporters originated.

STAR ENVOY

He may be the newest arrival to New Delhi's diplomatic corps, but the special treatment accorded to US ambassador Sergio Goro is marked. Goro hosted a party after his first month in India which was attended by both External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar and Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal. Goro attended the US-India T20 cricket match as chief guest of ICC chairman Jay Shah and was escorted by RIL head Mukesh Ambani and wife Nita. His visit to the Army's western command headquarters was widely reported and the presence of the accompanying US admiral was a mere aside.



HISTORY HEADLINE
BY SUMIT GANGULY

THE BANGLADESH Nationalist Party (BNP) has won a clear-cut victory, securing 212 of the 299 parliamentary seats. Tarique Rahman, the son of former BNP leader and Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, who was in exile since 2008 is now officially the PM. However, the BNP's principal opposition, the Awami League, was not allowed to participate in the polls.

Several questions immediately come to mind. How will the BNP govern the country, riven by political turmoil since the ouster of Sheikh Hasina? How are relations with India, its principal neighbour, likely to evolve? How will Dhaka handle its recently strengthened ties with Pakistan? Will it continue to maintain warm relations with the People's Republic of China? It is too early to offer definitive answers to these questions. It is, however, possible to make some tentative, educated guesses about the likely policy directions and choices of this nascent government.

Proffering initial answers requires delving into the history and evolution of the BNP since its inception in 1978 under General Ziaur Rahman. Zia, of course, had come to power in 1977 following the sanguinary aftermath of the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on August 15, 1975. Zia, while ruthlessly suppressing opposition and surviving multiple assassination attempts, held a largely free and fair election in 1979, in which his newly formed party won a parliamentary majority. His tenure in office, however, proved to be short-lived. Amid the country's tumultuous politics, he too was assassinated in 1981 during another successful military coup. This coup brought General Hussain Muhammad Ershad to office.

During General Zia's tenure, the country shed some of its secular orientation. In an ironic twist, a smart that Zia had



During General Zia's (left) tenure, the country moved away, to some extent, from the secular framework established by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. WIKIPEDIA

fought for the country's liberation in 1971, he sought to improve relations with Pakistan. Quite unsurprisingly, these moves did not endear him or his regime to New Delhi. A decade later, his widow, Khaleda Zia, assumed power as military rule in Bangladesh came to a close.

In the interim, especially under General Ershad, Bangladesh had increasingly moved away from its original secular foundations. Instead, religion was progressively enshrined in the country's politics, with Islam being declared the state religion in 1988. It was hardly surprising that Begum Zia, upon assuming office, continued this drift. Indeed, her embrace of Islam in the country's politics reflected a deep underlying tension in the country's identity and political culture: the contradictory currents of linguistic and religious nationalism, a strain that continues to cleave the country.

Given that the country's politics are riven along these lines and given the right-of-centre orientation of the BNP, it will bear watching how it proceeds to deal with the country's steadily dwindling minority Hindu population, which has declined from about 12 per cent in 1981 to around 8 per cent today. Even though the BNP, with a firm majority in parliament, is not dependent on Jamaat-e-Islami, it will nevertheless be inclined to nod towards the growing religiosity that has come to characterise the country's politics in recent decades.

How it negotiates these shoals will, inevitably, affect its relations with New Delhi.



Additionally, given its historic pro-Pakistani orientation, its diplomatic overtures towards Islamabad will be of interest to India. Already, under the interim government of Muhammad Yunus, Bangladesh had, among other measures, granted preferential access to its ports to Pakistan and strengthened defences. Given the BNP's ideological leanings and its long-standing scepticism of India, the outreach towards Islamabad may continue under the new political dispensation.

Finally, even before the ouster of Sheikh Hasina, China had made diplomatic and military inroads into Bangladesh. It is all but certain that the new government will do little to stem those trends, especially as it can utilise that relationship to reduce its dependence on India for trade and investment.

In effect, the BNP's win will, in all likelihood, accelerate several currents that have come to characterise Bangladesh's domestic and foreign policies in recent years, especially under Yunus's interim government. Under these circumstances, policymakers in New Delhi will face significant challenges. Addressing them and managing bilateral ties will require skill, patience and imagination. Even as Bangladesh's election is worthy of celebration, several fraught issues loom on the horizon, both in terms of its domestic and foreign policy.

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When the joke's on you

IN A suit filed in the Delhi High Court, yoga guru Ramdev has objected to posts on Facebook and X that use his persona as a source of amusement and parody for comic relief to "generate audience engagement". Citing "personality rights", his counsel argued against "misleading and denigrating content" while X's legal team contended that political commentary, satire and public opinion must be protected. Noting that it's an impossible task removing everything someone famous finds insulting, the HC held firm that "we can't be so sensitive". And, that it was perfectly alright to fact check fake news on Baba Ramdev, as someone had done. Ramdev's net worth is around Rs 1600 crore, derived mainly from his wellness business Patanjali Ayurved which is now a major FMCG entity.

Whatever Ramdev is or isn't, it's impossible not to have a grudging sort of admiration for someone who's made his fortune parading around unselfconsciously in an orange loincloth, proudly displaying his hirsute

body, while holding forth on everything from corruption to entrepreneurship. His grand claims of miraculous cures have been discredited as appalling nonsense but he has got away virtually consequence-free because a gullible public bought into "Coronil", Patanjali's magic potion to cure Covid. In one video on YouTube that's been viewed a few lakh times, two comedians are having a field day replaying Ramdev's contempt for the Covid vaccine while peddling his own concoctions instead. Since then, Patanjali has been pulled up by the Supreme Court — they had to issue an unconditional apology for deceitful practices, a Delhi court restrained them from terming other companies' Chyawanprash as "dhoka", and, they've been fined for selling substandard ghee.

None of this seems to have affected Patanjali's bottomline or diminished the Guru's cult-like stature. Considering so many serious misdemeanours, a lesser mortal would prefer to slink into the background to safeguard the cores he's already accumulated,



ON THE LOOSE
BY LEHER KALA

but not Ramdev, who's marching valiantly ahead, undeterred, busy filing complaints against people making jokes about him.

It turns out no one's too rich or too successful to take offence; and it's one of the few pitfalls of the limelight that one must grin and bear other peoples' unflattering opinions, which they tend to pronounce on the Internet with delighted glee. Those wondering why Ramdev would care that inconsequential jokesters are poking fun at him don't get the psychology of stardom. From being a nobody to becoming a household name is some journey in one lifetime, and anyone even slightly self reflective will have moments of disbelief, aka the Imposter Syndrome. Could this rockstar really be me? By virtue of luck more than strategy, the myth of Ramdev soared with the symbolic revival of the greatness of ancient India. At this particular moment in history, when popular opinion is a force of such unprecedented power, Ramdev was recast as the gatekeeper of tradition, especially yoga. After so much

feting and accolades, it's unpleasant to be objectively evaluated, and discover that one's own embellished narrative is making a smattering of people at least squeal with laughter.

All the money in the world can't make up for the fact that the very insecurities we strive so hard to hide are so cringingly visible and a cause of cheer to others. One imagines though, a yogi is made of sterner stuff; the rest of us by force of circumstance have imbibed the wisdom that what other people think of you is none of your business. But whether you're Ramdev or a random person, it's always a gut punch to discover that everyone doesn't view you in the same dreamy, soft light you imagine they do. That, at some point, we all fall short of the expectations of others, is one of the many disillusionments of being alive, besides the more humbling reality, that fame may enshrine a chosen few in a halo of otherworldliness but that too, is unlikely to last.

The writer is director, Hutkay Films



REFLECTIONS

{ INCIDENTALLY }

Gopalkrishna Gandhi



If clocks do not stop on Sundays, life too shouldn't

Senior citizens may not see Sundays as fun given how difficult it is to avail essential services on a holiday. So, why not have a shift system for all Sundays and holidays so that no service is shut down. A robust weekend/holiday cadre can also address the case of unemployment

Sundays, I dread. For me, they are an unmitigated bane. Few are likely to agree with this, barring some fellow "super seniors". Members of that fragile community know what I mean. Their experience of this most unkind day of the week has to be the same as mine. But most other readers of this column, the yet-to-become-senior majority of this column's readers, will say, "Who the hell cares? If he dreads Sundays, let him drown himself in one."

This is a reader-reaction I have imagined, but it is surely real. Which reader of a Sunday morning newspaper will want to feel gloomy? Oldies are not for Sundays, nor Sundays for them. But the sun-kissed, young "under-sixties" — the Goldies — are. They are for Sundays, and Sundays for them. They can swim, swirl through their Sundays, play water polo in them, do the

backstroke/breaststroke in them, the butterfly and the dolphin-kick. Goldies are meant to cavort on Sundays, oldies are meant to "go down" in them.

Let me explain. A year has 52 Sundays. This is a factoid from calendric astronomy. Having lived almost 81 years, I have seen 4,212-plus Sundays — verily, an eternity. A smart statistician would say I have, by that count, seen the same number of Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and so on. Of course! Touché, true; point made. But so much is made of Sundays, such a mystique hangs over that last day of the week, that it cannot be regarded as just like any other day, no different from the rest.

Sundays are meant to be "something else", a weekly festival as it were. For me too they are that "something else", but that "something" — my "something" — is not pretty; not pretty at all.

To be sure, many Sundays have come and gone for me, uneventfully, un-memorably. Yes, some of those Sundays have been good enough, pleasant enough, like any other good and pleasant day.

But for the last 20 years or so definitely, in my post-senior years, I cannot remember a single Sunday, not one, as having been so enjoyable, so altogether delightful by virtue of being a happy Sunday, that I remember it gratefully as such. Not one.

Sundays mean for me, in that consecutive order, waking with the heart-thump of a fear that I or my wife who is only a little younger than I, may need during the day a doctor we cannot reach for he or she is on a well-earned "Sunday off". Our driver

being on his "Sunday off", we cannot get him to take us to a clinic or hospital that may have an out-patient emergency functioning. Getting an Uber or Ola on a Sunday is not as taken-for-granted a thing as it generally is. And pray God, our trusty car should be okay! If it is, then we could requisition the services of that miracle of a way-out, namely, the call-and-hire driver. He will charge a Sunday premium fee, but then health is health.

My thoughts will, on a Sunday morning, move next to the events that are happening that day, to which we are invited, where we are expected to be present, by good and kind people who have fixed them on a Sunday precisely because it is a Sunday and most people will be able to attend without the problem of a weekday time crunch. These kind hosts forget that for the elderly, locomotion on a Sunday is a chore — an expensive one at that. Our forced smiles and small talk conceal the anxieties of an iffy return home in a hired vehicle or in our own jalopy driven by a call-and-hire driver counting his minutes.

Should, God forbid, any of the essential services in our flat such as plumbing, the gas stove, our reliable water kettle, or the good but old fridge malfunctions, we will be sunk. None of the wonderful wizards who fix those things will be where they can be found. It is "Sunday off" for them. And, it is "headache on" for us.

Next, should that slave-driver of our times, the internet, and the WiFi decide to take a Sunday off, then we are finished! Our laptops, smartphones, and the many other devices that have made us utterly depend-



Such a mystique hangs over that last day of the week, that it cannot be regarded as just like any other day.

ent will then leave us marooned. No techie will be there for us to call because the link to him will not be there, for it is "Sunday off"! It will feel like God has abandoned us.

Sundays are also days when oldies have to reconcile to having to do without the company of younger members of the family as they have as they should have, better things to do with the holiday. And that is when oldies recall the days when they, as young parents, left their little ones home with minders, to step into the arms of the waiting world. Ayyo, Sunday thy name is Loneday.

What is true of Sundays is also, alas, true of public holidays or what used to be called "bank holidays". Some of them may exhilarate the young — Diwali, Holi, and that worst of all, New Year's Eve, being the marquee ones. But they fill me with anxieties — not just about the deafening explosions that come with the first, the drenching deep-dyeings that mark the second, or the drunken revelries that disfigure the third, but also because essential services go into repose. They are at rest. Which means, for me, that they are unavailable. God bless

and bless repeatedly the doctors and nurses, the ambulance drivers, fire servicemen, electricity department's and telecommunications' "linemen" who volunteer for duty on those days.

I must also mention here the several police personnel who report for duty on these "closed" days. They have families and dependents who must want them at home. But these men and women have a work ethic that is to be saluted.

In the same category are those who work our transport systems — bus, rail and air. Passengers will travel, on Sundays and holidays particularly. Do we — the passengers — realise how much we owe to those who are working on those holidays so that we may "go holidaying"?

And sanitary workers, God bless them the most! They are like us, family people. But whether with or without overtime/holiday compensations, they are out, sweeping, swabbing and cleaning. On Diwali, while we scatter thick and wide layers of cracker-debris and pollute the air without a thought, sanitary workers prepare to clear those millions of pieces of exploded wrap-

pings and paper from the roads the morning after.

Readers will permit, and forgive, the macabre thought with which I will close. The very idea that one may die on the eve of or on a Sunday or a public holiday is chilling. Will there be anyone to take what we are leaving behind of ourselves, albeit lifeless, to a morgue, crematorium or cemetery? Will there be a skeleton staff around to take over the about-to-be-ashe/dust?

The purpose of this baleful rumination is not to lament. A serious thought underlies it. We must have a shift system for all Sundays and holidays so that no service — not one — shuts down. We are a notoriously unemployed country. Surely, we can build up a robust weekend/holiday cadre, starting with the essential services, that can erase the difference between normal working days and holidays. Clocks do not stop on Sundays. Why should life?

Gopalkrishna Gandhi is a student of modern Indian history and the author of *The Undying Light: A Personal History of Independent India*. The views expressed are personal

{ SUNDAY SENTIMENTS }

Karan Thapar



When cricket becomes war minus the shooting

This column is not about cricket. It's about the behaviour of the Indian cricket team. More specifically, it's about grace on the games field, etiquette and the decent and proper behaviour expected of sportsmen. And it's prompted by the decision of our cricket team not to shake hands with their Pakistani opponents in Colombo last Sunday.

Frankly, that wasn't cricket. Indeed, that phrase sums up the point I want to make.

Cricket, they say, is a gentleman's game. It follows that there is a certain decorum that should be observed. Shaking hands with your opponents is part of the spirit of cricket. Not to do so flouts it.

There is an important point to remember about sport. The opposing side are not your adversaries. They are certainly not your enemies. They are merely opponents as keen to win the game as you are to defeat them. Shaking hands with your opponent exemplifies the spirit of sport. Shorn of that spirit, sport is reduced to

just physical exercise. It loses its higher meaning.

The truth is that if political tensions are so severe that we cannot even shake hands with Pakistani cricketers then, logically, we shouldn't have played Pakistan at all. But once we decided we would compete against them, our team let the country down by failing to shake hands.

The belief that they upheld the country's honour by this rudeness is not just mistaken, it reflects a fragile and insecure nationalism.

India is strong enough and courageous enough to do the right thing even in difficult circumstances. Sadly, on Sunday, our cricket team was not.

I doubt if the world was impressed by our team's behaviour. It doesn't prove how strong and resilient our nation is. Instead, it suggests a lack of confidence in ourselves that we needed to snub the other side to prove our own valour.

This wasn't the first display of such churlish and immature behaviour. It also

happened in Dubai last September. But it contradicts the way our team has behaved in the past. In 1999, at the height of the Kargil war, the Indian team shook hands with Pakistan at the World Cup in England. In doing so, they were not forgetful of what Pakistan had done and they were not dishonouring the Indian soldiers who were, at that very moment, laying down their lives defending our threatened border. They were simply doing the right thing as sportsmen.

In addition, they acknowledged the fact that cricket is not war by other means. It's a game with a code of conduct of its own and the honourable thing to do is to observe it.

Perhaps the most glorious moment for India-Pakistan cricket ties happened in January 1999 at the Chennai Test. Against expectations, Pakistan defeated India. When their players took a lap of honour in the stadium, the Indian audience gave them a standing ovation. It was a moment that showed the greatness of India to the world. That was a generosity of spirit, a large heartedness, that I was then, and will always be, proud of. It was India at its best. As the commentator Harsha Bhogle said on air "this is the best sight you will see anywhere in the world ... if you ever wanted to see a victory for sport, here it is on your television screens, in your drawing rooms." Pakistan, no doubt, won the match. India, however, carried the day.

That was, of course, before Kargil. But nine months later, when an Asia Eleven competed against the Rest of the World in

THERE IS AN IMPORTANT POINT TO REMEMBER ABOUT SPORT. THE OPPOSING SIDE ARE NOT YOUR ADVERSARIES. THEY ARE CERTAINLY NOT YOUR ENEMIES. THEY ARE MERELY OPPONENTS AS KEEN TO WIN THE GAME AS YOU ARE TO DEFEAT THEM. SHAKING HANDS WITH YOUR OPPONENT EXEMPLIFIES THE SPIRIT OF SPORT

Dhaka, Sachin Tendulkar, Ajay Jadeja, Anil Kumble and Sourav Ganguly played under the captaincy of Pakistan's Wasim Akram and won the match. They didn't hesitate to do so because they understood the spirit of cricket.

Sadly, on Sunday, our cricketers showed the world how brilliantly they play the game but how poorly they understand its spirit. They proved they were the better players and long may that be the case. Alas, they also suggested they are not gentlemen.

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

{ ENGENDER }

Lalita Panicker



Nuh's women get a voice against domestic violence

The last *Engender* column looked at how community radio proved transformative for women's lives in Jabua, Madhya Pradesh. Community radio has been no less transformative in Haryana's Birsika village. The village's anganwadi was run by a woman from another village who routinely diverted rations meant for pregnant women and children to her own private school. But, backed by Radio Mewat, six women from the Hinsa Ko No group summoned the police and put paid to this pilfering. This ensured that the *anganwadi* started working again.

Radio Mewat was piloted in 2018 to familiarise women with the Domestic Violence Act (DVA) 2005. A survey across 10 villages revealed that nearly every household had a case to report, but women remained silent due to shame, fear, and the risk of social ostracism. In Nuh, most girls are married within the region, often to near or distant relatives. In such contexts, reporting violence jeopardises relationships across households, forcing silence.

Despite the DVA being in force since 2005, awareness of rights among women in Nuh district remained extremely low. Many women did not even recognise everyday abuse as violence. Access to formal support systems was limited, and trust in institutions was weak.

In 2019, with support from the Azim Premji Foundation, Seeking Modern Applications for Real Transformation (SMART), the NGO that runs Radio Mewat, mounted an on-ground intervention in 25 villages in Nuh. Groups of women aged 18-40 were formed. These groups became safe spaces for discussing rights, sharing experiences, and building collective confidence. Radio programmes were heard during narrowcasts and discussions facilitated by the Radio Mewat team.

The intervention included training local media, police, ASHA workers and other stakeholders — facilitating turning awareness

into action. Najma from Nangli village says, "My husband used to torture me, and I endured it for my daughter. One day, he brought another woman home. I came to my parents' home, lost and directionless. Then I heard the Hinsa Ko No programme on the radio and approached Radio Mewat. They helped me register my case and supported me throughout the process. Today, I run a small cosmetics shop to support myself and my child."

A community radio is run by the locals, speaks to the community in its language, and allows women to share, even anonymously if needed. Neeru from Kurthala village says, "Through Radio Mewat's women's group, I found my voice, my confidence, and my courage. Today, I can boldly say no to violence, not just for myself, but for other women in my community."

Hinsa ko No, which received 590 cases at the station itself, has been an extraordinary intervention. Information on domestic violence, rights and DVA provisions have reached more than 6,000 households in the villages where Radio Mewat has formed groups.

Through 22 community radio stations in Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, and Haryana, the initiative has supported more than 2,000 domestic-violence survivors. Archana Kapoor, who heads SMART, says, "I think the time has come to look at community radio as civic infrastructure rather than an information dissemination. If we are serious about improving our social indicators, then community radio can play a pivotal role."

Community radio's impact is visible in health, education, nutrition, WASH, climate action and agriculture. What community radios lack is funding. It is high time that state governments explore its potential.

The views expressed are personal

Pakistan's cricket mirrors suffocation of its civic life

Can we infer that in sports, a team's performance reflects, in some sense, the psychic health of a nation? I ask this question after watching the India-Pakistan T20 World Cup cricket match played on 15 February. It was impossible, watching Pakistan's hapless batting collapse, not to wonder whether the problem lay merely in poor strategy or field selection — or in the malaise of a demoralised State. The manner in which the best Pakistani batsmen flailed around, swinging carelessly without thought of resolve or responsibility, seemed to indicate a palpable dispiritedness and dimming of hope.

Over the past few years, Pakistan has stumbled from one crisis to another: An economy gasping for breath, a polity throttled by military dictatorship, and a citizenry that has learned to live with perennially diminished expectations. The country's most celebrated cricketer, former Prime Minister Imran Khan, has been languishing in jail, an irony as bitter as it is revealing.

Whether or not one agrees with Khan's politics, his imprisonment represents, for many Pakistanis, a moral wound. It signals a polity at war with its own icons and a system incapable of introspection. The cricket team's limp performance, lacking cohesion or conviction, seemed almost a subconscious tribute to that paralysis.

A people humiliated in their civic life

rarely rise to glory on the sporting field and play joyful, fearless, assertive cricket. A team, representing citizens reconciled to the inevitability of decline, will struggle to rise to the luminous theatre of international sport with the lightness of spirit and the clarity of focus that greatness demands. When internal decay corrodes a polity, it seeps into its collective psychology. Teams do not — and cannot — escape this osmosis.

It is not as though India does not have its discontents, its unfulfilled hopes, and its bitter internal differences, part of any democratic polity. It is true too that, cricket apart, our performance in international sports is far below potential. But India is far, far from being a failed State. By contrast, failure is writ large on the evolution and current condition of Pakistan.

When a nation subordinates its civic and moral imagination to authoritarian dictates, and allows democracy to be pulverised by the barracks, even its athletes begin to despair. The cricket field is not a parade ground, and batsmen are not infantry obeying orders.

To innovate, to improvise, to attack — the hallmarks of the great Pakistani cricketers of old, from Hanif Mohammad to Wasim Akram — requires an inner self-confidence.

That confidence withers in a climate of fear and apathy. Although Pakistan has the



The cricket field is not a parade ground, and batsmen are not infantry obeying orders.

proven ability to play good cricket, its last performance against India mirrored the suffocation of its public life. The country's cricket boards may change their coaches and captains, but unless the spirit of the land recovers its vitality, its sportsmen will remain shadows of their former heroes.

Besides, there is a psychological contract between sportsmen and their fans in the audience. Fans project their unspoken hopes onto players, and players draw strength from that collective faith. When the crowd believes, miracles do happen. But what happens when belief itself is eroded? When citizens are too weary, too disillusioned, to invest hope even in their sport?

The February 15 match, therefore, was not merely about 22 men and a white ball. It was about the moral metabolism of nations. It reminded us that success in any collective endeavour cannot be divorced from the inner equilibrium of a society. A nation that silences its thinkers and

imprisons its heroes can — like China does — either produce soulless well-performing robots or, as Pakistan did, dejected and lethargic gladiators. Watching Pakistan's performance, I distinctly felt that the ball, as it were, was not in the bowler's hand — it rested uneasily in the conscience of a country that was visibly defeated in spirit. Excellence, whether in art, science, or sports, is not cultivated in isolation from the emotional and moral ecosystem that sustains it.

India must not, in triumph, gloat but reflect. For the same principle holds universally: A dictatorial, corrupt, or divided India too would one day falter on that same field. Sport, in the end, is not merely a spectacle but a mirror. And the image it throws back is often truer than any political speech or economic statistic.

Pavan K Varma is an author, diplomat, and former Rajya Sabha MP. The views expressed are personal

{ SUNDAY LETTERS }

Preparing for the AI revolution

This is with reference to "Dealing with the tsunami of AI and other new tech" by Martin Rees, Shivaji Sondhi and K VijayRaghavan (February 15). All stakeholders must invest in upskilling as India's AI opportunity is significant; we have to leverage our demographic dividend strategically to be a leader in the AI race.

Bal Govind

II

This is with reference to "Dealing with the tsunami of AI and other new tech" by Martin Rees, Shivaji Sondhi and K VijayRaghavan (February 15). The government must allot more funds and establish dedicated S&T advisory bodies to guide accelerated deployment in R&D.

Sanjay Chopra

III

Governments must institutionalise high-level scientific advisory mechanisms to assess AI's risks and societal impacts. Proactive analysis, not reactive regulation, will help nations balance innovation with stability.

P V Prakash

Write to us at: letters@hindustantimes.com

لِسَانُ الْعَيَانِ أَنْطَقُ مِنْ لِسَانِ النَّيَانِ
وَشَاهِدُ الْأَحْوَالِ أَعْدَلُ مِنْ شَاهِدِ الْأَقْوَالِ
(من أقوال العرب)

YOUR DAILY ARABIC PROVERB
The tongue of sight is more eloquent than the tongue of speech, and the witness of circumstances more truthful than the witness of words.
An Arab Maxim

Opinion

The real story behind the Saudi-UAE rift

ALI SHIHABI



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Many Western commentators, unable to resist a complicated explanation for a simple problem, have offered a whole menu of theories for the recent Saudi-Emirati tensions. Some make for a neat story. Most miss the point.

The strain between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi is simply rooted in national security. Specifically, it stems from the UAE's conduct in Yemen and Sudan, which Saudi officials increasingly view as destabilizing and directly threatening the Kingdom. Online sniping and narrative warfare may raise the temperature, but they are symptoms. The cause is the strategic impact of policies in two conflict zones where Saudi Arabia bears the greatest exposure.

That is why the many framings of this rift get it wrong. Riyadh's concern is not where a consulting firm places its regional office, nor is it a desire to "downsize" the UAE in regional politics. The issue is whether a close partner is widening security risks on Saudi Arabia's periphery while still benefiting from the optics of Gulf unity.

Start with Yemen. Saudi Arabia and the

UAE entered the conflict in 2015 to restore the internationally recognized government and prevent Yemen from collapsing into a hostile militia state on the Kingdom's southern border. Yemen is not a distant theater for Riyadh. A failed Yemeni state means porous borders, weapons proliferation, criminal networks, and permanent openings for hostile actors in Saudi Arabia's backyard.

Over time, the coalition's unity frayed over the end-state. Riyadh has prioritized Yemeni stability under a single, internationally recognized central government able to control territory and secure borders. The UAE, by contrast, cultivated close relationships with powerful southern forces whose objectives have often been to weaken that government's authority and entrench fragmentation.

For Saudi Arabia, this is the difference between a Yemen that can police its territory and a patchwork of militias with competing sponsors and shifting loyalties, an ecosystem that rewards keeping the state weak. Saudi Arabia can live with tactical and commercial differences with the UAE. What it cannot accept is a partner empowering local actors whose incentives

are to keep Yemen fragmented, weak, and perpetually negotiable.

Sudan, across the Red Sea from the Kingdom, presents a parallel concern. Instability there spills into the Red Sea basin and the Horn of Africa, regions Saudi Arabia considers part of its strategic depth. A fractured Sudan threatens maritime security along one of the world's most important corridors and pulls neighboring states into a widening zone of disorder.

Events on the ground have sharpened these fears. The rebel Rapid Support Forces' campaign culminating in the fall of El-Fasher was accompanied by atrocities that a UN Human Rights Office report said may amount to war crimes and possible crimes against humanity.

Human rights groups and investigative reporting have alleged that external backing has helped sustain the RSF, including allegations of Emirati support, which the UAE denies. Reuters has reported claims that a secret training camp in Ethiopia prepared RSF fighters and that the UAE financed and supported activity linked to that effort. Abu Dhabi also rejected those allegations.

If the rift were about ideology or

economics, it would imply prolonged structural competition. But if it is rooted in Yemen and Sudan, it is solvable, provided Abu Dhabi treats Saudi security sensitivities with the seriousness they deserve.

The path back is clear. In Yemen, it requires genuine alignment around a shared end-state: empowering the internationally recognized government, ending unilateral support to local armed actors that undermines state authority and deepens fragmentation, and pursuing a credible political track to address the question of South Yemen's future status. In Sudan, it requires convergence behind a ceasefire and a political process that strengthens central government institutions rather than rewarding militia rule, alongside serious, verifiable steps to halt arms flows and logistics that prolong the civil war.

The Saudi-UAE relationship has weathered disagreements before, and it can do so again. But clarity about the cause is essential. This is not a battle over business districts or diplomatic ties. It is a test of whether Gulf partnerships are anchored in shared security outcomes. For Saudi Arabia, security has to come first.

It is a test of whether Gulf partnerships are anchored in shared security outcomes; For Saudi Arabia, security has to come first

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To make this ceasefire work, the US must end the Israeli veto on monitors and deploy a multinational force

History can teach us how to make Gaza ceasefire work

DAOUD KUTTAB



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The US-sponsored ceasefire for Gaza was approved by the UN Security Council three months ago, yet the killing has not stopped.

Since the truce supposedly began in October, at least 586 Palestinians have been killed and more than 1,000 have been injured. In Gaza, the "peace" looks remarkably like the war that preceded it, with civilians still caught in the crossfire and a humanitarian catastrophe deepening by the day. If Thursday's Board of Peace meeting is to be anything more than a symbolic gesture, members must work on moving from a sham truce to a genuine cessation of hostilities.

One way to find a solution is to look at previous ceasefires that actually worked. History shows us that a ceasefire is not merely a pause in shooting; it is a technically complex agreement that requires specific pillars to remain standing.

The monitoring vacuum in Gaza is perhaps the greatest catalyst for failure. Israel has barred foreign journalists and international observers from the Strip. The International Stabilization Force envisioned in US President Donald Trump's 20-point plan remains a phantom. Without boots on the ground from neutral parties — the kind of monitors that stabilized the Sinai after 1979 or the Balkans in the 1990s — a ceasefire is just a piece of paper. Israel has even vetoed the inclusion of Turkish and Qatari troops, insisting instead on a force that will do what its own military could not: the total and immediate disarmament of Hamas. To make this ceasefire work, the US must end the Israeli veto on monitors and deploy a multinational force with a clear mandate to verify violations and report them directly to the UNSC.

Beyond monitoring, a ceasefire needs a functioning civilian alternative to the chaos of war. For weeks, 14 Palestinian men and

one woman have been waiting in Egypt for Israeli permission to enter Gaza.

This National Committee for the Administration of Gaza is composed of non-Hamas technocrats, chosen by the US team in coordination with all parties. Yet they remain stranded while Israel reportedly objects to trivialities like the committee's logo.

By preventing a vetted civilian government from taking root, the status quo ensures that Hamas remains the only governing power in Gaza, which in turn justifies continued Israeli military operations.

Furthermore, a ceasefire only holds when it is linked to a credible political horizon. Previous successful truces were never an end result; they were the first phase of a larger political settlement. The promise of "Palestinian self-determination" cannot remain a footnote in the 20-point plan.

While Washington's focus has drifted toward Iran in recent weeks, the reality is that the toxicity of the Middle East cannot

be drained so long as Gaza is left to fester. The Board of Peace must reestablish a "credible pathway to statehood," as recognized by the UN, and give the Palestinian people a reason to invest in the calm.

Finally, we must address the humanitarian death by a thousand cuts that undermines the truce. Israel has refused to allow prefabricated homes for those in tents and has restricted the entry of the heavy equipment needed to recover the thousands of bodies still trapped under the rubble. A ceasefire that secures the release of Israelis but leaves the Palestinian population to freeze and starve is not a peace plan. True success requires the full lifting of the siege and unconditional entry of aid, as required by international humanitarian law.

We must learn from the past: peace is not kept by silence but by the active presence of monitors and the promise of a future beyond war, occupation, siege and attempts at displacement.

Opinion

Europe, the world's underappreciated superpower

NADIA CALVINO

If there is one key takeaway from last weekend's Munich Security Conference, it is a message of trust and confidence in Europe. The EU is a technology, trade and industry powerhouse.

Around Europe, the signs of this strength abound; off the northern coast of Poland, just beyond the horizon, 233 giant turbines — each almost as tall as the Eiffel Tower — are about to rise from the sea floor. With German rotors, foundations designed in Denmark and cables from Poland and Greece, they will be towering symbols of European manufacturing excellence and industrial might. As the latest additions to an already vast Baltic fleet, they are creating thousands of jobs across the supply chain; and when they are operational, they will supply an additional 5.5 million households with clean energy.

Meanwhile, cutting-edge fiber optic sensors pioneered by Dutch innovators will be watching over the seabed to protect Europe's critical infrastructure. New constellations of satellites developed in Belgium will offer enhanced surveillance capabilities from space, alongside cutting-edge radar systems from France and Spain.

And all these systems will be connected by artificial intelligence-powered 6G networks developed in Finland.

These are just a few of the nearly 900 investment projects financed by the European Investment Bank Group last year alone. In fact, the overall investment in the EU's energy transition reached a new record in 2025, approaching €400 billion (\$455 billion) — from hydropower in

Austria to new railways in Czechia and from energy efficiency upgrades by small businesses in Croatia to clean technologies deployed by heavy industries in Portugal. Just in the past year, the combined market capitalization of European renewables companies has risen by more than

50 percent. Something that many thought impossible in the near term is already happening — Europe is irreversibly weaning itself off Russian gas.

European investments in defense are increasing even more rapidly. European defense stocks have tripled in value in the past three years. Europe's industrial production capacity now exceeds even that of the US in critical areas, including artillery shells. Europe is moving by leaps and bounds into strategic sectors



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and technologies such as drones. A new venture capital ecosystem geared toward pioneering security and defense enterprises has emerged almost overnight and essentially from scratch.

We have seen a similar mobilization before. In 2020, no one expected that a European biotech company would pioneer a vaccine against an unknown virus in a matter of months, helping the world put down a once-in-a-century pandemic.

In the face of trade warfare, intense market volatility and shifting traditional partnerships and alliances, European companies have proven resilient, not only diversifying their trade flows but also maintaining strong growth and investment.

Time and again, the EU has adapted and reinvented itself in the face of crises, leaving it well prepared to navigate a tempestuous geopolitical environment. An export powerhouse, the EU is home to world-class universities and research centers, as well as a vibrant startup ecosystem.

With a \$22 trillion economy, a vast single market of nearly half a billion people and plans for another wave of enlargement, Europe's weight in the world is undeniable. It may be a different kind of superpower,

one that prizes values, rules and multilateralism over sheer might. But its power lies in its commitment to principles and willingness to back its partners and allies, as demonstrated by its status as the biggest source of financial and military assistance to Ukraine.

As the biggest source of humanitarian aid and development finance, Europe funds everything from global vaccination campaigns to projects to improve water supplies in Amman and Karachi.

European unification started nearly eight decades ago from the ashes of two world wars. Our parents and grandparents learned from the tragedies and mistakes of that dark era and we can draw inspiration from their example to shape a better

future for ourselves and others around the world. Ours is a society based on inclusion, equality of opportunity, intellectual freedom, peace and the rule of law.

We know what needs to be done to preserve this way of life. We need even deeper integration, including our capital markets. We need even more large-scale investment in critical infrastructure and strategic capabilities. We need simplification to make the EU more agile and efficient.

Something that many thought impossible is already happening — Europe is weaning itself off Russian gas

Ours is a society based on inclusion, equality, intellectual freedom, peace and the rule of law

NATO can help the Arctic remain a zone of stability

LUKE COFFEY

With no end in sight to Russia's war in Ukraine and a large US military buildup taking shape around Iran, another region that usually receives less attention is appearing in the headlines: the Arctic.

The Arctic region encompasses eight countries: the US, Canada, Denmark (because of Greenland), Norway, Sweden,

Finland, Iceland and Russia. It is widely believed to hold vast energy reserves, including oil, gas and rare earth minerals. The region is also growing in economic importance as melting sea ice opens new shipping lanes.

As the Arctic's global significance grows, so does interest from both Arctic and non-Arctic countries — especially in an era defined by great power competition.

A recent example was President Donald Trump's push to acquire Greenland for the US. Washington already has a decades-old defense agreement with Denmark that provides very broad defense access and basing rights in Greenland. Nevertheless, Trump and his administration argued that outright US ownership was necessary to

secure the Arctic region adequately.

Few dispute Greenland's importance to America's security. However, some of the rhetoric surrounding the proposal was reminiscent of the language Russia has used about Ukraine. Domestic political blowback in the US, combined with diplomatic engagement from NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte, led Trump to soften some of his more aggressive tones regarding Greenland.

Yet the episode had a broader effect; it helped awaken NATO allies to the importance of the Arctic.

At the NATO defense ministerial meeting last week, the alliance announced the launch of a new security initiative in the High North called Operation Arctic Sentry. This follows two other

recent efforts — Eastern Sentry, focused on Eastern Europe, and Baltic Sentry, focused on the Baltic Sea region. Arctic Sentry is designed to concentrate allied attention and resources on the High North in a way NATO has not done in the past.

Countries have already begun contributing ships, aircraft and personnel. The UK recently announced that it would double the number of troops it maintains in Norway over the next three years and



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Denmark has committed F-35 fighter jets to the mission.

Historically, NATO has been internally divided over its role in the region. Norway, which during the Cold War was one of only two NATO members bordering the Soviet Union (the other being Türkiye), long advocated for a stronger alliance presence in the High North. Canada, by contrast, often resisted expanding NATO's role, viewing Arctic security primarily as a matter for sovereign states rather than for the alliance as an institution.

Three major factors explain the shift we are seeing today.

First is Russia — and, increasingly, China. Although NATO as an institution paid limited attention to the Arctic after the Cold War, Russia did not. Moscow has reopened Soviet-era bases, constructed new military facilities and invested heavily in Arctic-capable forces. Specialized brigades trained for Arctic warfare have been modernized. Russia's Northern Fleet, headquartered above the Arctic Circle, accounts for about two-thirds of the Russian navy.

Second, NATO enlargement has fundamentally altered the alliance's Arctic profile. Before 2022, five of the eight

Arctic states were NATO members. With Finland's accession in 2023 and Sweden's in 2024, seven of the eight Arctic states — every Arctic country except Russia — are now under the NATO umbrella. This reality makes it inconceivable that the alliance would not take the region more seriously.

Finally, Trump deserves some credit. Whatever ultimately motivated his push on Greenland, the debate forced European allies to confront Arctic security more

directly. The proposal created diplomatic friction but it also spurred greater European investment and attention. In strategic terms, that renewed focus strengthens deterrence and enhances transatlantic security.

Global interest in the Arctic will only intensify in the coming years. As ice recedes and access expands, Arctic and non-Arctic states alike will devote more resources to securing their national interests. Military activity, commercial shipping, scientific research and competition over energy and minerals will all increase.

NATO's growing role in the High North is not about militarizing the region unnecessarily, it is about preventing instability before it takes root. The alliance can help ensure that the Arctic remains a zone of stability.

Arctic Sentry is designed to concentrate allied attention on the High North in a way NATO has not done

Although NATO as an institution paid limited attention to the Arctic after the Cold War, Russia did not

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The FT View



FINANCIAL TIMES

"Without fear and without favour"

The message of Britain's royal arrest

Probe into former Prince Andrew over Epstein ties is an example for the US

Rarely do events in rural Norfolk capture the attention of the world. But Thursday's arrest of the former Prince Andrew on suspicion of misconduct in public office related to his links with the late sex offender Jeffrey Epstein made international headlines. The man now known as Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor is the first senior British royal to be arrested since 1647, when King Charles I was taken into custody by parliamentary forces. That led eventually to a short-lived republic. This week's arrest is, for now, a crisis of the royal family and not of the institution of the monarchy. It might yet become one.

Mountbatten-Windsor was released under investigation, with police continuing to probe whether his alleged leaking of documents to Epstein when he

was a UK trade envoy amounted to a criminal offence. The former prince has vigorously denied wrongdoing; no charges have yet been brought and none may ultimately emerge. If they do, the country would face the extraordinary prospect of a court case brought in the name of the king against his brother.

King Charles III has faced criticisms of being too reactive in responding to Mountbatten-Windsor's Epstein ties. Each time more information has come to light, however, the monarch has punished his brother, including stripping him of his royal title last November.

This has created something of a fire-break between the institution and the actions of the former prince. It is not clear that this can hold. Even if there is no trial, the family will face intense pressure for transparency over Mountbatten-Windsor – including his links to the late Virginia Giuffre, an Epstein victim who said she was brought to London at 17 for sex with him. There is already increased scrutiny of the ex-prince's

reported £12m settlement with Giuffre in 2022, and how it was funded.

For an institution that relies on tradition, trust, and even today a measure of mystique to maintain its position in Britain's constitutional order, this is potentially corrosive. Walter Bagehot, the 19th-century constitutionalist, observed that royalty needed to be revered, "and if you begin to poke about it you cannot reverence it".

The allegations against the former prince risk fuelling, too, a wider public disillusionment with Britain's institutions. Yet many will take some reassurance from the fact that a man raised in royal palaces can be detained by police for questioning. It is a sign that, even if the monarch has sovereign immunity, no one else is above the law.

Indeed, British and European responses to last month's Epstein files release might serve as an example across the Atlantic. The former UK ambassador to Washington Peter Mandelson is being investigated for the same

In America, the political class is so far largely unscathed, even if some senior business people have stood down

alleged offence as Mountbatten-Windsor, related to his own Epstein links; Sir Keir Starmer's decision to appoint Mandelson has further weakened the struggling prime minister. A former Norwegian prime minister has been charged with aggravated corruption over his Epstein links, and a former French minister is under police investigation.

In the US, the political class is so far largely unscathed, even if some senior business people have stood down. The only arrests have been Epstein himself and his accomplice Ghislaine Maxwell. Epstein's female victims are still waiting for justice to be properly served.

In a country where the Department of Justice was this week emblazoned with a large banner of Donald Trump, it is hard to imagine any close relative of today's president ever being put on trial while he is in office. Yet however anachronistic Britain's constitutional make-up may appear, the law is being allowed to take its course against a senior royal. In today's world, that counts for a lot.

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Opinion Data Points

'Is university still worth it?' is the wrong question

John Burn-Murdoch



Britain is a rare case where the graduate earnings premium has eroded during the expansion of higher education

Change in graduate earnings premium & graduate share of workforce, 1997-2022



Source: FT analysis of the Luxembourg Income Study. Graduate earnings premium = annual earnings of people with tertiary education vs average with secondary education

Britain's university graduates are having a rough time of it. In 1999, the average graduate salary was 80 per cent more than their non-graduate counterpart; in the latest data this was down to just 45 per cent, and that's before factoring in student loans. Adding insult to injury, the government has worsened the terms of the loans to ensure repayments don't wither in line with salaries.

A common response is to blame simple economic inevitability. Today 41 per cent of Britain's workers have a degree, up from 20 per cent in 1999, and if you increase the supply of something (graduates), you reduce its price (earnings). A more nuanced version argues that rather than imparting new skills, university education mainly serves to signal who the most skilled people already are, so expanding participation dilutes the average skill level of graduates, along with their average earnings. Either way, so the argument goes, earnings erosion was inevitable, the government should have anticipated it and graduates shouldn't have been sold an economic fiction.

But there's one problem: none of the above has happened in most other developed countries. In the US, college graduates today earn 92 per cent more than non-graduates, up from 80 per cent in 1996, even as the share of people with a degree has climbed from 27 per cent to 40 per cent. Graduate earnings premiums have also held up or increased in the face of expanded enrolment everywhere from Canada to France, Spain and the Netherlands.

Worsening graduate fortunes, it turns out, are a particularly British problem, and one that – like many – can be traced to the particularly British ailments of weak productivity growth and poor economic performance more broadly.

When you break it down, the graduate earnings premium – and graduate salaries more broadly – are not really telling us about the innate value of studying a particular subject at a particular institution. Instead, they are telling us about the value of those qualifications in a particular economy at a particular point in time. The travails of Italy's graduates in the 1990s and 2000s were more a comment on the country's stagnant economy than its higher education system; the same is true of the UK today.

All of the countries where graduate

wage premiums have held up during expanded higher-education participation have had solid-to-strong productivity growth over recent years, boosting wages, especially in skilled jobs. In Britain, productivity and graduate earnings alike have never recovered from the financial crisis, while the steady ramping up of the minimum wage has squeezed the earnings premium from the lower end too.

And it's not just about what skilled jobs pay, it's also how many there are. Since the 1990s the share of managerial and professional jobs in the US economy has risen from 28 to 59 per cent. In Germany it's up from 19 to 30 per cent and in the Netherlands up from 34 to 45 per cent since 2005. The UK has seen just a six percentage point rise from 27 to 33 per cent since 1991.

As a result, more and more UK graduates are working in non-graduate jobs and earning non-graduate wages – not because of an absolute oversupply of graduates, but an oversupply of graduates relative to the numbers of well-paid professional jobs in the economy. Elsewhere in the world, robust increases in the population of graduates have been matched by skilled job creation.

This shows the problem with thinking of certain subjects of study as inherently low value. Take performing arts, where five years after university graduation the average Briton earns £25,000 – roughly the minimum wage. Their US counterpart pockets \$48,500 (£33,000), around a third more after adjusting for price differences, with the disparity rising to 60 per cent across all subjects – all the more galling considering US graduates are if anything slightly less skilled (using the OECD's definition) on average than their counterparts in the UK and western Europe.

Like so many of contemporary Britain's problems, the graduate squeeze is downstream of broader economic woes. Efforts to alleviate it would do better to focus on restoring growth than making tweaks to higher education intake and financing. If Britain can haul its productivity growth and skilled job creation back into line with its peers, graduate earnings will be stronger, enabling student loan terms to be more generous and allowing more young people to pursue their passions confident of landing a good job.

john.burn-murdoch@ft.com

Letters

Why Sweden's project to redesign its banknotes backfired

With a smile and a sense of déjà vu I read Gillian Tett's witty and thoughtful column on the squabble in the European Central Bank about the new Euro banknotes ("Europe needs to put its money where its mouth is", Opinion, January 31).

During my tenure as vice chair of the Council of the Swedish Riksbank – Sweden still using the Swedish krona having decided not to join the EU single currency – few other issues required more time or emotion than the one about new banknotes. The process to replace the old outdated notes took many years, and when I left Sweden to work abroad, the new design was still under discussion.

Who should be on them? No kings or queens, no politicians. But who? We decided to use faces from the world of culture, men and women in equal numbers, and from all parts of the country. No living persons, but no ancient ones either like Linnaeus or Celsius. Instead we chose opera singer Birgit Nilsson, filmmaker Ingmar Bergman, film star Garbo and the UN secretary-general Dag Hammarskjöld and some others from the last century. And landscapes, from north to south of the country so that everybody would feel represented. A compromise that would upset nobody. Maybe the ECB got some inspiration here?

When I came back to Sweden the

new notes were in circulation and I started carrying a SKr200 (\$20) note in my pocket. And here's the thing – several years went by and I still carried the same note. I never used it, and almost nobody else used them either. And if you happen to see them you don't recognise them because they are so rare. At least I don't.

With the move to digital payments, the whole ambitious process to choose new notes may have been a big waste of time and effort. Since the project started, banknotes in circulation have declined by 75 per cent.

A major justification for the new design was to make banknotes more difficult to counterfeit, but that seems

to have backfired too. Contrary to the purpose of the whole project, the number of counterfeit banknotes is now a surprising five to 10 times larger than a decade ago, in spite of all the advanced technology that has been introduced in paper and printing. I guess it has become easier to fool people as hardly anybody knows what the true banknotes look like.

Maybe this is a lesson to be studied by the ECB before they spend even more time and money on "the dreaded European working group".

Leif Pagrotsky
Former Vice Chair, Council of the Riksbank; Former Minister of Industry and Trade of Sweden, Stockholm, Sweden

Betting on elections is ripe for corruption

In a Saturday edition where Martin Sandbu rehearses philosopher Michael Sandel's economic and political theory, and where Gillian Tett flags the dangers of the "normalisation of deviance", readers can be forgiven for feeling a little queasy reading the Lunch with the FT interview with Tarek Mansour, co-founder and CEO of Kalshi, America's biggest predictions market (Life & Arts, February 7).

Mansour's manipulation of language is a hallmark of this "normalisation", and it is perhaps no surprise that under the Trump administration's rush to deregulate, the federal appeals courts in Washington chose to agree by sleight of hand that Kalshi's fun and games with money were not a casino. It ruled on a technicality, and narrowly avoided entering the fray on what is plain to see.

The idea that betting on elections is market "participation" is nonsense, and is entirely ripe for corruption and manipulation. That the model avoids the gambling label because, among other things, there is no "House" to play against, is again a manipulation of what's really happening. The House is the rest of us, it's society, and I doubt Sandel would feel too good about that either.

Prediction markets are structurally risky, and as the category of acceptable speculation expands, so regulatory oversight shifts from morality to market structures, and with that, financial speculation merges with civic processes, a concept Sandel has been warning against for decades.

Prediction markets influence public perception because people are prone to interpret market pricing as objective probability and the data appears to be harder to dismiss than polls.

Even Mansour knows this and talks about this very thing in plain sight, leaning on the idea that prediction markets are more accurate than polling. So that's OK then. The notion of the "wisdom of crowds" is another misnomer: it is the influence of the "few" that can afford to play such high stakes games.

Just a glimpse of Jeffrey Epstein's now famous side-table of photographs illustrating your unnerving Big Read "Epstein's social Ponzi scheme" in the same weekend edition shows clear as day the avarice and self-interest of wealth and influence.

Elections must not become tradeable assets, neither should public decision-making become monetised.

We should all be very worried about that, especially now.

Simon Larter-Evans
Founder, Life Narratives
Northend, Oxfordshire, UK



Mandeville's 'The Fable of the Bees' is a satire on how economies work

How the Rollboard has normalised overtourism

In addition to the three trivial inventions dismantling our humanity ("The quiet catastrophe in your pocket", Life & Arts, FT Weekend, February 14), I would add the Rollboard, or two-wheeled suitcase, to Pep Torres' insightful list.

As a fellow designer, I can think of few artefacts that so clearly both represent and facilitate the way we now consume travel and travel destinations. The Rollboard normalises excess: more belongings, more movement, essentially more of "us", and ever less concern for scale, impact or destination.

Would restricting what we take abroad or onboard to only what we can physically carry offer a modest but meaningful response to the pressures of overtourism?

Brian Proudfoot
GOODD LTD,
Glasgow, Scotland

Mandeville's fable – a sting in the tale?

Your excellent editorial about GLP-1 drugs ("The challenges of a weight-loss economy", The FT View, February 14) reminded me of Bernard Mandeville's *The Fable of the Bees* (1714), which tells the story of a prosperous hive of bees whose residents all get rich by supplying each others' needs for assorted pleasures and luxuries.

When one fine day they renounce all their vices, there is no longer work for anyone to do and their economy enters a precipitous decline.

Mandeville's warning that private vices bring public benefits is as timely now as it was then.

Keir Hartley
Worthing, West Sussex, UK

Glad to see you didn't join the 'Hamnet' cynics

Well done Janan Ganesh for not joining in the "competitive cynicism" with his piece on *Hamnet* (January 31). I was literally speechless for a time after the movie, transported by the beauty and power of it. I've heard it described as manipulative. What a nonsense. If I'm not thoroughly manipulated at the end of a movie I'm usually disappointed.

Come on people. Stop the smart carping and celebrate *Hamnet* for the triumph it is.

"If this be error and upon me prov'd"
(Sonnet 116) ... call me a midwit.
Patrick Daley
London W6, UK

A Family affair

Robin Lane Fox's column, with its delightful mix of gardening advice and classical or other historical/literary references, is much admired.

It was, however, surprising to see a rare taxonomic mistake in his column on the subject of epiphytes (February 7). He states that the tillandsias are members of the bromeliads, "a big class of orchids". Tillandsias are indeed bromeliads (Family Bromeliaceae), but not even remotely related to the orchids (Family Orchidaceae). These two Families do not even share the same higher taxonomic level, as the bromeliads are in the Order Poales, whereas the orchids are in the Order Asparagales.

Robert Zimmermann
Forest Ecologist, ret'd.
Westmount, QC, Canada

Miniature map reading

I read Jana Tauschinski's FT Magazine feature "Five maps to change the way you see the world" (February 14) with great interest. The Belgian Gerardus Mercator could never have imagined that his cartography – a 1569 map for navigators – would still be used by mapping services today. But the complexity of the world has made mapping borders and geographical interactions, through conflict and climate change, almost impossible.

Perhaps we should consider the work of Belgian poet and filmmaker Marcel Broodthaers, who in 1975 created *La Conquête de l'espace. Atlas à l'usage des artistes et des militaires* (The conquest of Space. Atlas for the Use of Artists and the Military). It is a miniature atlas, 38x25 mm, containing the outline of 52 countries, one on each page, in alphabetical order and scaled to fit the page. As a result, a small country like Lichtenstein is as big as the United States of America. Problem solved.

Luc Haenen
Boechout, Belgium

Don't forget NM Rothschild is a German-émigré firm

Schroders' impending takeover by Nuveen prompted John Gapper (Opinion, February 14) to highlight how German-émigré firms drove the growth of London's financial sector.

Inexplicably omitted from his roster was NM Rothschild & Sons, whose founder arrived in the City from Frankfurt (via Manchester) in 1809. Concluding that no others of that ilk are left in the City, Gapper is really only half right in awarding the prize for longevity to Schroders: NM Rothschild's core investment banking business remained British until 2003, when control was acquired by a French branch of the same cosmopolitan family, whereas all of Schroders, bar the fund management business targeted by Nuveen, fell to Citigroup three years earlier. So the "last laugh" is shared, I'd say.

Charles Mercey
Tellisford, Somerset, UK

The King's retro TV

Having studied colour television technology in the 1960s, I was most amused by the picture on the front cover of the FT Magazine alluding to the feature inside on Graceland, Elvis Presley's home (Spectrum, Life & Arts, January 10). The TV in the corner looks like an RCA Victor from early 1957. Ignoring the comical vulgarity of Presley's home decorations, it is amusing to think he was still using a 20-year-old television, with all his wealth. Even then it was retro, but maybe it appealed to him for that reason.

Stephen Redburn
London E18, UK

Mandelson, Epstein and the intra-elite divide

Janan Ganesh, in his column "Mandelson and the two elites" (Opinion, FT Weekend, February 7) skewers the notion that only great wealth can bring social status in America despite an Enlightenment-era constitution full of ideas inspired by events in old Europe. Financial capitalism or democracy are mutually exclusive in Donald Trump's America.

Richard Ellis
Bangkok, Thailand

Keeping it brief

I liked the line (Life & Arts, FT Weekend, February 14) in the piece on briefs by Inés Cross: "I understand G-strings to be increasingly niche".

Very delicately phrased!
Giovanna Forte
Brighton, UK

Opinion

Only an army – and true integration – will solve Europe's defence problem

GEOPOLITICS

Adam Tooze



man military is in worse shape than the French. France maintains a nuclear deterrent. Germany is closer to Russia. It is a more populous country, with a larger economy. It is only reasonable for German defence spending to be greater than that of France. Nevertheless, in historical terms, the scale of the divergence is new.

European integration after 1945 was a solution to the problem of how to face the Soviet Union with the reconstruction and rearmament of western Europe while maintaining a balance between west Germany and France.

The rationale for the European Coal and Steel Community, established in 1951, was to ensure a level playing field for heavy industry, the hard core of the military-industrial complex. West German military spending first overtook that of France in 1965. Thereafter, the ratio settled at between 1.3:1 to 1.5:1. When the cold war ended, Germany shrank the Bundeswehr. By the early 2000s, France regularly outspent Germany. So far, Germany's spending fol-

lowing the *Zeitenwende*, or "watershed", announced by former chancellor Olaf Scholz in early 2022, has returned us to the ratios of the 1960s and 1970s. It is the targets set by the Merz coalition and the lack of response from France that push us into unprecedented territory.

Back in 2011, Poland's foreign minister Radosław Sikorski famously quipped that he feared German power less than German inaction. But did he imagine Germany outspending France by a factor of two? A country in which the Alternative for Germany, a party that questions the Oder-Neisse border with Poland, runs neck and neck with Merz's CDU in the polls?

The point is not that a re-armed Germany is about to go on a rampage. The point is that for Europe to work there needs to be trust and co-operation and that requires balance. In the early 1990s, when German reunification upended the European status quo, Helmut Kohl had the wisdom to insist that a unified Germany be embedded in deeper European integra-

tion. That same logic applies today.

One "solution" would be to encourage others in Europe to match Germany and to re-arm too. To do so, they need not only exemptions from European fiscal rules, but common debt issuance. There is a precedent for this. Since 2020 Europe has financed NextGenEU, the Safe programme and the package of

self-defence should open the door to EU common bonds.

But what Europe needs far more than yet another inter-governmental solution – a "solution" that perpetuates the grotesque inefficiency of its 27 separate armies – is truly joint action. It needs a European army.

This was the solution preferred back in the early 1950s, when the project of a European Defence Community was launched at the same time as the Coal and Steel Community. Five years after the end of the second world war, the idea was that it would be safe to re-arm west Germany if German units were integrated into a single European force.

The idea was not particularly popular with ex-Wehrmacht soldiers who suspected that they would be used as cannon fodder. And it was not popular in France, whose parliament, in the wake of the humiliation of Dien Bien Phu in Vietnam 1954, voted it down. It was that crisis that opened the door to inviting west Germany as a sovereign state to join Nato, thus creating what we

have since taken to be Atlanticist "normality".

Given the collapse of the Atlanticist dispensation, it is time to return to that fork in the road. As was clear in back-room conversations during the Munich Security Conference, the idea of a European army is both unavoidable and controversial. Those clinging to Atlanticism fear that it will accelerate America's exit from Europe without offering a realistic alternative. But what today is realistic? If US backing is in fact no longer real, while German military spending is, Europe risks sleepwalking into a dramatic rearrangement of European power without a stabilising adjustment in the political framework. To advocate for lopsided, nation-state rearmament as the path of least resistance, while rejecting deep military integration and common financing, is not just shortsighted. It is a betrayal of the most basic wisdom of European integration.

The writer is an FT contributing editor and writes the *Chartbook* newsletter

We are embarked on an experiment. European defence spending is increasing. But not everyone's spending is increasing at the same rate.

The Germans and the Poles are re-arming hard, raising defence spending both in absolute terms and as a share of GDP. France, Italy and Spain don't see the urgency or can't afford to. The result is new imbalances.

On current trends, by 2029 German military spending will be roughly twice that of France. "Variable geometry" is the slogan of the minute. But is this a divergence Europe should live with?

You might say it is high time. The Ger-

The bloc risks sleepwalking into a rearrangement of power without a stabilising political adjustment

support for Ukraine through common borrowing. The large-scale issuance of European debt would help to create a European safe asset to balance US Treasuries. Berlin, as always, is dragging its feet. It is time to get over that. If the fall of the Berlin Wall led to the Maastricht treaty and the euro, the necessary assertion of a European capacity for

Reasons to worry about the US investment position

FINANCE

Gillian Tett



fiscal deficits, sales of US debt and returns on US and non-US assets.

But the most recent data (late 2024) shows this negative NIIP has exploded to the equivalent of 91 per cent of US GDP. That is not really down to the trade deficit or even sales of US debt to foreigners.

Instead, the key culprit is the fact that between 2019 and 2024, US stock indices rose 83 per cent, while non-US indices only rose 9 per cent – meaning more wealth went to non-Americans holding US assets than in reverse.

Thus while the negative US NIIP has exploded, Norway, China, Japan, Canada, South Africa and Sweden have large positive NIIPs. And these imbalances almost certainly widened in 2025, since US stock markets kept surging.

Does this matter? Some economist might argue not, given that the NIIP is an abstract accounting framework. Anyway, Trump loves to celebrate soaring US stocks.

But one message to absorb from this story is that if the US tech bubble implodes, the pain will spread beyond America. Forbes calculates, for example, that if US equity prices and FDI reverted to 2019 levels, Norway, Canada, Sweden and China would see a reversal of the investment gains equivalent to 20-40 per cent of their GDP. Yikes.

A second point is that we need more nuance around America's "exorbitant privilege", to coin the phrase launched

Beneath the aura of calm, our global financial system is plagued with stunning, oft-ignored imbalances

by Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, the former French president. He resented how non-Americans had to keep buying American debt, even amid US fiscal profligacy, because of the dollar's reserve currency status, since the pattern seemed akin to non-Americans subsidising the US and enabling the US to live beyond its means.

But the NIIP data shows that "this exorbitant privilege has [now] reversed to become more of a 'generous give-away'" from the US to the wider world, says Forbes. Or as a 2022 paper from the economists Andrew Atkeson, Jonathan Heathcote and Fabrizio Perri echoes: "Any ex post 'privilege' that US residents might have previously enjoyed has been erased."

Non-Americans might shrug this off. But the key point is this: beneath the current aura of calm, our global financial system is plagued with stunning, oft-ignored imbalances. Maybe these will quietly correct (a bit) if the dollar falls this year, or tech stocks slide. But don't bet on that. While global investors keep rushing into the US, we face a wildly lopsided world.

gillian.tett@ft.com

Discomfort with new leadership prompted his decision to depart '60 Minutes', write Anna Nicolaou and Zehra Munir

Anderson Cooper has built a career on restraint. With hair that started turning silver at age 20, perfectly tailored suits and a measured cadence, it all cultivated the authority of a man slightly apart from the noise.

Yet the moments that fixed the American broadcaster in the public imagination were the ones when his composure cracked: flashes of anger in the floodwaters of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina and the visible emotion he showed when confronting government officials live on air.

That instinct appears to have shaped his latest decision. Cooper left CBS's *60 Minutes* programme this week after nearly two decades, having joined in 2006. The move, according to people familiar with the matter, reflected both personal considerations – a desire to focus on his role at CNN and his young family – and discomfort with the programme's editorial direction under the new leadership of "anti-cancel-culture" journalist Bari Weiss.

"He has a very clear sense of what's right, and he's not afraid to stand up for it," says Jeff Zucker, who ran CNN from 2013 to 2022.

Weiss, who built a following on a critique of liberal orthodoxies through her start-up *The Free Press* and had no prior experience running a TV news division, was installed by new corporate owner David Ellison as CBS News editor-in-chief in October. Her tenure has been turbulent, punctuated by her decision to delay a *60 Minutes* segment on an El Salvador prison – something that drew criticism from the newsroom. Last week a departing producer said staff felt pressure to "self-censor".

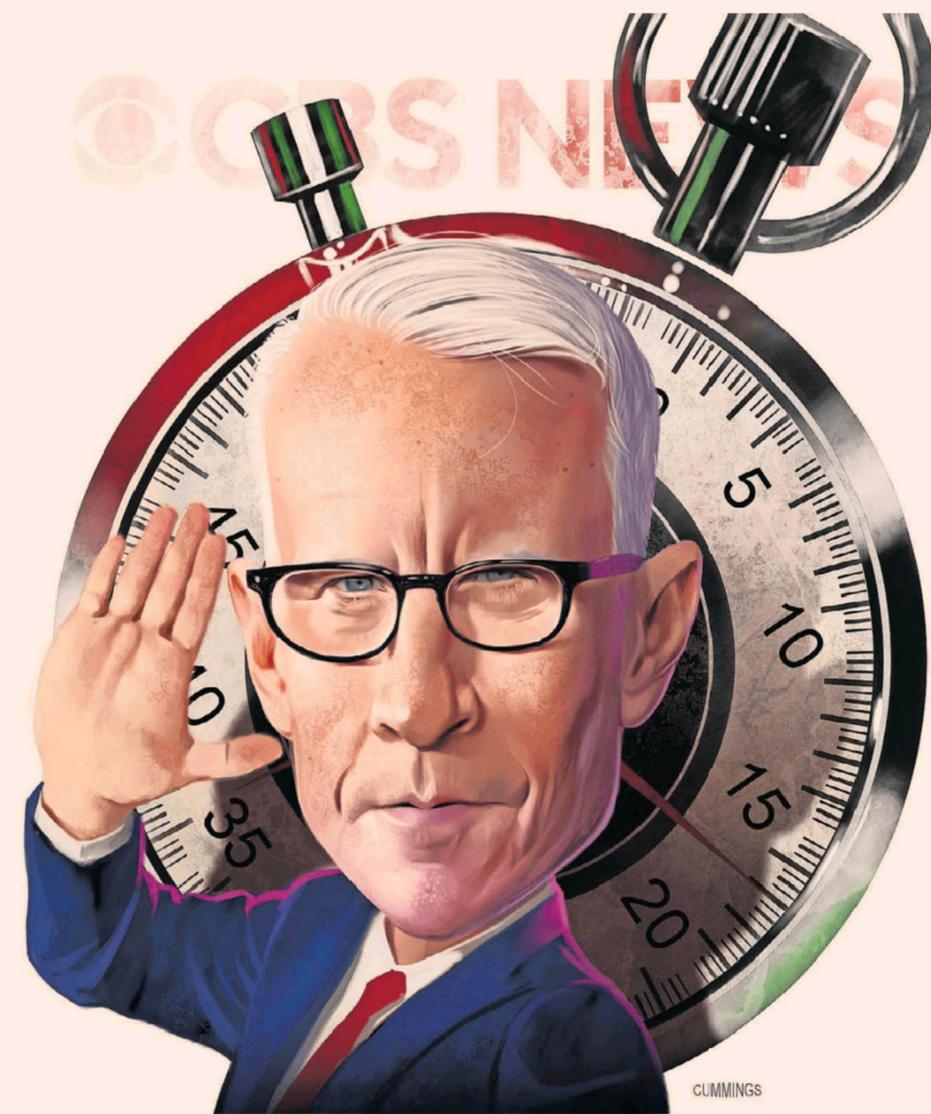
Cooper's exit from CBS is the latest example of his tendency to pull back when the fit feels wrong. The 58-year-old has spent much of his life keeping a distance from the institutions that conferred prestige on him, including the one he was born into.

Cooper is part of the Vanderbilt family, one of America's oldest dynasties, via his heiress mother Gloria. His first two decades were marked by tragedy as well as opulence. His father, a screenwriter, died when he was 10 years old. A decade later, Cooper's older brother Carter died by suicide, jumping from a terrace in their Upper East Side home.

Grief propelled the young scion into risky arenas. After studying at Yale, he dispatched himself to war zones such as Myanmar and Somalia, armed with a faux press pass and a home video camera, which he used to film reports for classroom news provider Channel One. In a 2022 *New Yorker* interview he said his early travels took him to places that "were precarious, very real, elemental – where life and death were something that people wrestled with and spoke about".

It was in the early 2000s, after a turn at ABC hosting a reality TV show, that his career began to pick up pace. Hosting gigs at CNN led to his first primetime show, *Anderson Cooper 360°*, in 2003.

But it was when he reported from the sites of Hurricane Katrina's wreckage in 2005 that Cooper became a recognisa-



Person in the News | Anderson Cooper

The veteran network anchor leaving CBS

ble personality for many Americans. Confronting a Louisiana senator in the disaster's aftermath, he spoke of a body left in the streets for two days, "being eaten by rats", and demanded: "Do you get the anger that is out here?"

The exchange marked the moment Cooper became something more than a polished anchor, in the mould of Walter Cronkite or Tom Brokaw. He emerged as a witness unwilling to sanitise what he saw. CNN expanded his role, with then president Jonathan Klein calling him "the anchor person of the future".

"Anderson desperately cares about the truth, he wears his emotions openly, and he's got life experiences that few other anchors bring," says Zucker. "That makes him stand out from almost anyone."

Cooper's departure from CBS raises questions about the future of the traditional news anchor in an increasingly polarised America, as traditional television viewership declines.

His exit is "the latest sign the middle

ground is shrinking", says Gabriel Kahn, a University of Southern California journalism professor and former Wall Street Journal bureau chief. "There is no room for down the middle reporting."

For Cooper, the desire to report on crisis has always been personal as well as professional. The suicide of his brother

'He has a very clear sense of what's right, and he's not afraid to stand up for it'

– something he has spoken about often – left him preoccupied with rupture and survival.

In recent years, the anchor has leaned into his vulnerability. After his mother died in 2019, he created a CNN podcast about grief, collecting stories from celebrity guests about their losses.

His reserve has eased in other ways.

Long guarded about his private life, Cooper has spoken openly about becoming a father in his fifties and co-parenting his two young children with his former partner Benjamin Maisani. He hosts a New Year's Eve broadcast with friend Andy Cohen during which he frequently dissolves into laughter, offering a glimpse into a person who is comfortable off-script.

Cooper's departure from *60 Minutes* comes as the age of the all-encompassing network anchor fades. It is, Kahn says, "another drip, drip, drip in the trusted voices" leaving.

Then again, he did not fit neatly into the old model. "Walter Cronkite wasn't relatable, he was authoritative. Anderson Cooper is authoritative but also relatable," adds Kahn. Cooper's career is therefore not bound by CBS. He is a hybrid who "exists outside the brand that hosts him".

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YOUR VOICE

How an immigrant taught Americans to see Lincoln

By Mark B. Pohlad

In the 20th century, it was an immigrant who taught Americans how to truly see Abraham Lincoln. Jewish Hungarian editor Stefan Lorant, who lived from 1901 to 1997, published sensational photo-illustrated books and articles about the 16th president. He proved that newcomers often shine a revealing light on the best of their adopted country.

As the left-leaning editor of a Munich picture magazine, Lorant was locked up by the Nazis for seven months. His memoir “I Was Hitler’s Prisoner,” published in 1934, was an urgent look at the deepening fascist crisis and quickly became a bestseller in England and the U.S. Upon his release, Lorant and his family fled to the West.

While he was incarcerated, Lorant had been transformed by a book of Lincoln’s speeches and letters. “It immediately hit me in the solar plexus,” he recalled. “Of course, I wanted to know more about this man! Lincoln became my hero. ... I tried to think, feel, and live as he had.” Countless immigrants before and since have done the same.

In 1941, freshly arrived in America, Lorant published the first of his many popular biography picture books, “Lincoln: His Life in Photographs.” He was so enthusiastic about his subject that the entire research, writing, layout and production of the book took just six weeks. In its pages, lavish, large-format photographs of the “Rail Splitter” told the dramatic story of his life and the Civil War era. Life magazine called it “the most American of books.” Over the years, Lorant would enlarge and revise it three times and in so doing inaugurated the new genre of photo-biography.

By reproducing photos of Lincoln, Lorant moved beyond the varied mass of



Stefan Lorant, right, of Pittsfield, Massachusetts, stands beside Dr. C. Percy Powell, of the Library of Congress, at the door of one of the safes containing Abraham Lincoln’s manuscripts opened to the public on July 26, 1947. HARVEY GEORGES/AP

subjective artworks — paintings, prints and sculpture — that only approximated his appearance. Here was the real Lincoln, what he really looked like. And he reproduced those photos larger and more vividly than ever before. They were (and are) as close as one can get to being in Lincoln’s presence. As Lorant knew, the light rays that fell on Lincoln’s face and body during the exposure are the same ones that actually made the photographs of him. Indeed, leafing through Lorant’s books is very moving even today.

Although he was a passionate histo-

rian if ever there was one, Lorant didn’t insert himself in his writing. But when he describes the Lincoln family immigrating north to Illinois from Indiana, perhaps something of his own refugee’s experience comes through: “Onto the ox wagons the thirteen people piled all their earthly belongings and headed for the prairie lands of Illinois. ... That was on the Sangamon River. The Indians gave the river its name, it meant ‘the land of plenty to eat.’ Would it prove to be so for them?”

Lorant invited readers to see in Lincoln’s photographs the highest aspi-

erations of his adopted country — fairness, honesty and decency. People did just that during World War II, during the Civil Rights Movement and during the strife-filled 1960s. Altogether, Lorant’s popularization of Lincoln photos took the topic out of the hands of scholars and collectors and moved it into the hands and homes of everyday people. That his biographies were read by immigrants and world citizens is a matter of record. In 1976, his “Life of Abraham Lincoln” was published in a short paperback form and translated into many languages including Spanish and Arabic. It was published in other countries with the support of the U.S. State Department.

Lincoln himself was famous for his genuine magnanimity toward immigrants. An 1858 speech vividly described “the electric cord in that Declaration (of Independence) that links the hearts of patriotic and liberty-loving men together.” He encouraged Americans to “discard all this quibbling about this man and the other man — this race and that race and the other race being inferior” and how they should be instead “united as one people throughout this land.” These noble sentiments apply, of course, even more urgently today.

As insightful immigrants have often done, Lorant held up a mirror to the values and history dear to this country. Through his Lincoln publications, a new American gave us the man who is often called the First American. In these troubled times, what else can immigrants teach us to see?

Lorant was born on Feb. 22 — 10 days after Lincoln’s own birthday — exactly 125 years ago.

Mark B. Pohlad, Ph.D., teaches about the history of photography at DePaul University in Chicago.

Voice of the People

Voting is very important

These days, many of us dread reading the news. Each day brings new fears about Immigration and Customs Enforcement, voter suppression, the environment, health care, higher costs and more. We are all realizing how our lives are being rapidly changed against our will, and many people feel helpless.

The greatest risk to our country and democracy would be if we just accept what is happening. There is something you can and should do: Vote!

More than ever before, our elections are incredibly important. We must make sure that our local, state and national representatives will work for us.

This year, in Illinois, we have the opportunity to identify and vote for candidates who will fight for us and our country. Voting isn’t just a right; it’s a duty. It’s essential that we use our power as citizens to elect the candidates who will best represent us in our hometowns, in Springfield and in Washington.

Start by voting in the Illinois primary election on March 17. Early voting has already started. Your primary vote is needed to help select the strongest candidates for November. County clerk websites publish sample ballots so you can research the best candidates for you.

It is even more important to vote in the Nov. 3 general election. As Thomas Jefferson said, “We do not have government by the majority. We have a government by the majority who participate.”

You can support our democracy. Participate. Speak up. Attend rallies. Vote. Bring a friend. Our future depends on it.

— Kathy Winterhalter, St. Charles

Advice for voting by mail

The U.S. Postal Service taking one to three days to postmark or just process mail is not new. We’ve heard anecdotal evidence this has been going on with vote-by-mail ballots since at least 2024. What appears to be “new” is that this procedure was finally codified in December and made public.

Our advice to voters is to focus on what they should do to protect their vote-by-mail ballots:

Use a secure drop box where available or return your vote-by-mail ballot directly to the election authority’s office.

Use a drop box for this purpose at early voting sites.

Go inside the post office or postal retail site and request your ballot be postmarked.

Request and return vote-by-mail ballots as early as possible to avoid possible delays in processing.

Consider the last day as March 10 to put your ballot in the U.S. mail.

— Becky Simon, president, League of Women Voters of Illinois

Tinley Park police’s failure

The 2008 massacre inside a Tinley Park Lane Bryant remains unsolved. It’s about time the nearly 56,000 residents of that village call out their police department for its lack of guts, communication, transparency and results. When is enough, enough?

Despite a \$100,000 reward, a sketch and evidence left at the scene, the case has

never seen an arrest or a suspect. Tinley Park police have failed their community, the people and most importantly the victims’ families. Shame on them.

— Charlie Minn, Chicago

Eisenhower’s intervention

Regarding the excellent op-ed by Michael Peregrine highlighting the legacy of President Dwight D. Eisenhower (“President Eisenhower deserves our gratitude, not indifference,” Feb. 16), he states that Eisenhower’s “support for the Civil Rights Movement was generally passive.”

I take issue with that statement. In what I believe is an injustice to Eisenhower’s legacy, the author fails to recognize the significance and historical perspective that Eisenhower brought to that era. He had the courage to mobilize the National Guard to enforce federal law so that nine Black students could be admitted to Little Rock Central High School after they were denied entry by Arkansas Gov. Orval Faubus and an angry mob that opposed desegregation.

The story of the Little Rock Nine, I believe, was a pivotal moment in the Civil Rights Movement and is well documented in a series of books, and it is highlighted at the Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library & Museum in Abilene, Kansas.

That moment in time deserves recognition.

— Don Olynyk, Glen Ellyn

Supporting Little Rock Nine

Michael Peregrine observes that President Dwight D. Eisenhower was passive in his support for civil rights. How can he forget one of the great defining moments of the Civil Rights Movement, when Eisenhower sent the 101st Airborne to support the Little Rock Nine?

— Jane Thomas, Arlington Heights

Rename airport for Jackson

Coverage of the Rev. Jesse Jackson brought home what an iconic national figure he was. His memory should be forever preserved in Chicago in a meaningful way. I would suggest renaming Midway International Airport as Jessie Jackson Memorial Chicago Airport.

— Joseph Kimmell, Chicago

Homeschooling question

Regarding the Feb. 11 article on homeschooling (“Free the kids”): While education is compulsory in Illinois for children up to age 17 and homeschooling is a legal option for parents, the article leaves out one very important question parents opting for homeschooling should consider. That question is: “Am I capable of teaching even the fundamentals of academic subjects such as reading, writing, math and science?”

A significant portion of the skills involved in learning these subjects is

developmental, meaning that these skills can only be acquired and internalized over a period of years. As a public school language arts teacher, I once had a student whose parents opted for homeschooling when the child was in an early grade, then reenrolled the student in the eighth grade. As a pupil in my average-ability language arts class, the student was ill prepared, being several years below grade level in his ability to read and write in a manner typical of a 13-year-old. The parents wanted us to “catch him up” for high school, which is not only impossible but places a very unreasonable expectation on the classroom teacher.

When a child is allowed to fall significantly behind where they should be academically, there is no magic formula for solving a problem that was years in the making. The bottom line here is that not all parents have the skills requisite for taking a young child and, over time, transforming that child into a young adult with some semblance of age-appropriate literacy.

— Sean C. Nettle, Homewood

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