

What Putin’s visit might achieve

PRABHU DAYAL

Russian President Vladimir Putin's forthcoming visit to India - in early December 2025 - is highly significant as it aims to reaffirm and strengthen the "special and privileged strategic partnership" amidst a challenging global geopolitical landscape and increasing Western pressure on India. This visit, the 23rd annual summit, will be his first to India since the Ukraine invasion in February 2022, underscoring its importance. The visit is part of a long-standing tradition of annual summits between the two countries, which alternate locations between India and Russia.

Donald Trump's aggressive policies and rhetoric have inadvertently pushed India to reaffirm and strengthen its longstanding, strategic ties with Russia. Ultimately, the pressure campaign by the United States has proved to be a "self-goal" that has reinforced India's resolve to pursue its strategic autonomy and potentially strengthen the alignment with Russia.

Putin's visit is seen as significant for India's foreign policy as it balances relations between Moscow and Washington. It is a strong signal of India's strategic autonomy and its commitment to a long-standing, trusted relationship with Russia, even as the US has imposed tariffs on India over its continued purchase of Russian oil. Both nations coordinate regularly on international political issues and aim to build a just, multipolar world order. The visit is intended to deliver major outcomes and reinforce the relationship amid a changing global order and Western pressure on India regarding its trade with Russia.

The visit is a culmination of extensive preparatory meetings, including External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar's recent visit to Moscow and discussions between PM Modi and Putin's aide Nikolay Patrushev in New Delhi on November 18 where they discussed strengthening collaboration in the maritime domain, including connectivity, port development, skill development, shipbuilding, the blue economy, and Arctic operations.

The leaders will discuss regional and global developments, including the Ukraine conflict and coordination within international bodies like the UN, BRICS, G20 and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), where both countries are members. Russia supports India's demand for a permanent UN Security Council seat. A "vision" document is expected to be signed, laying out a roadmap for cooperation across various sectors including shipbuilding (including "green shipbuilding" and ice-class vessels), space, agriculture, and infrastructure.

Defense remains a central pillar of cooperation, with discussions expected on critical projects like the joint development of a fifth-generation fighter jet, further S-400 missile system deliveries, and potentially the joint production of S-500 systems. The leaders plan to move forward with defense projects, including potential deals for fighter jets and missile defense systems. Despite India's efforts to diversify its defense partners, Russia remains a critical supplier, accounting for a significant portion of India's military inventory.

Discussions will also focus on boosting trade and investment, particularly in energy (oil and nuclear power), and addressing logistics and payment challenges. India and Russia have committed



to boosting bilateral trade to a target of \$100 billion by 2030 and exploring alternative payment solutions to circumvent Western sanctions. Key deals in oil exploration and supply, nuclear energy (e.g. increasing the number of reactors at the Kudankulam power station), and direct diamond sales are expected to be finalized.

The leaders will focus on resolving related issues like logistics and payment mechanisms, potentially using local or third-country currencies. Both nations are looking to finalise new pacts and initiatives to boost economic ties, with a focus on diversifying trade beyond energy and addressing the existing trade deficit. Discussions are also underway for a Free Trade Agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union.

A bilateral mobility agreement is expected to be signed to facilitate legal migration and protection of skilled Indian workers in Russia, which is experiencing a labour shortage. The agreement aims to establish a formal framework for legal migration, protect the rights of Indian workers in Russia, and facilitate the expansion of skilled Indian manpower in key Russian economic sectors.

Russia is keen to attract skilled Indian workers in industries such as construction, textiles, engineering, electronics, and IT. The pact will offer new employment opportunities for skilled Indian professionals and ensures their legal protection and dignified employment in Russia.

In conclusion, Putin's visit is a continuation of regular high-level exchanges and is driven by mutual strategic interests, the goal of which is to foster a multi-polar order. The visit reinforces a "special and privileged strategic partnership" that has been a consistent factor of stability in international relations, allowing India to pursue its national interests on the global stage. Ultimately, the visit is a test of India's diplomatic skill in balancing its historic friendship with Russia with its evolving global partnerships, demonstrating its ability to engage with all major powers on its own pragmatic terms.

(The writer, a retired IFS officer, served as India's Ambassador to Kuwait and Morocco and as Consul-General in New York.)

Why terrorists use ammonium nitrate

SHAMIM HAQUE MONDAL

Recently, the nation witnessed two major blasts: the first at the Red Fort complex in Delhi on November 10, and the second at the Nowgam police station in Srinagar on the night of November 14. However, there was no car bomb or terrorist attack on the second occasion; a large amount of explosives seized by the investigating agency was stored in the Nowgam police station, which exploded during the examination.

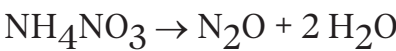
Experts initially concluded that explosives behind the two incidents were primarily made from ammonium nitrate, combined with fuel oil and detonators. The possibility of other powerful explosives such as PETN, SEMTEX, and RDX was feared, but it was later revealed that their quantity was small.

Why ammonium nitrate? It is a white crystalline powder substance, which is commonly used as a nitrogen-rich fertilizer to increase crop yields. The country has just witnessed how dangerous the use of this seemingly harmless chemical can be. A powerful shock wave is generated during the explosion, which causes the surrounding area to shake and the explosion to spread. That is why it is widely used in the mining and construction industries.

This chemical, comprised of ammonium (NH₄⁺) and nitrate

(NO₃⁻) ions, is a powerful oxidizer. Simply said, it provides enough oxygen for the reaction; nevertheless, other ingredients are necessary to initiate ignition. In chemistry, ammonium nitrate is stable and safer than other explosives when kept under controlled conditions; however, when exposed to intense heat or stirring, the gas released from it will ignite an explosion if there is a liquid organic compound or a readily available incendiary substance such as a detonator.

Nitrous oxide (N₂O) and water vapor (H₂O) are initially produced from ammonium nitrate at high temperatures (around 300°C).



At higher temperatures, they break down to form nitrogen (N₂), oxygen (O₂), and water (H₂O).



Explosive reactions can also make other gases, such as ammonia (NH₃), nitric oxide (NO), and nitrogen dioxide (NO₂). NO₂ is the one that makes the reddish-brown clouds that we observe when explosions occur. When thermal oxidation events happen at very high temperatures and pressures, they make these gases. NH₄NO₃ is ideal for creating improvised explosive devices (IEDs) since it looks safe and stable yet has a lot of hidden destructive power.



There are other explosives, but why are extremists so inclined to ammonium nitrate?

It is readily accessible in the market. In an agricultural nation such as India, there is significant demand, resulting in ample supply. It can be stored with ease. Other military-grade explosives, including RDX, face restrictions. The terrorists exploited this scenario. Furthermore, it exhibits greater stability compared to first-line explosives and can be transported using regular cars, enabling attackers to accumulate substantial quantities with minimal effort.

In recent times, the repeated use of ammonium nitrate has become a cause of serious concern for the security of the country. The Government of India, in 2012, enacted the Explosives Act and the Ammonium Nitrate Rules, which lay down a set of rules for its manufacture and marketing, such as compulsory licensing; not to be stored in crowded places; to be stored away from the locality with high walls; to have adequate fire extinguishers; import and export activities to be limited to certain ports; not to be sold in the

open; to be sold only in packet form, etc.

Not only is it necessary to create laws, but also to put them into action. The dual use of NHNO often hinders its fruitful application. To combat this ongoing threat, it is essential to use modern technology, raise public awareness, and maintain strict surveillance from the administrative place.

(The writer is associated with the Physics Division of the State Forensic Science Laboratory, Kolkata.)

NOW AND AGAIN

A SCHOLAR'S FIGHT AGAINST FATE

ARUN KANTI CHATTERJEE

My father, Naresh Chandra Chatterjee, the late principal of A. C. College, Jalpaiguri, was a man of unwavering principle. Deeply devoted to his teaching and administrative duties, he refused the many prestigious offers that came from Kolkata. His commitment to the college left him little time for his own health or even for everyday family life. Though his work kept him sedentary, he never indulged in rest; I cannot recall a single day when he stayed in bed for leisure.

Surprisingly, he remained free from the common illnesses that troubled the rest of us. Perhaps it was his disciplined habits or sheer force of will. But fate had its own course. Quite suddenly, he was diagnosed with heart disease - a blow that cast a long shadow over our home.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, medical science in small towns in India was still in its early stages. Specialists were scarce, and even the term "cardiologist" was unfamiliar. My father travelled to Kolkata to consult one such expert, following every bit of advice he received - more out of necessity than optimism.

Yet he never surrendered.

Even as his health declined, his mind remained sharp and restless. He sought not only treatment but understanding. He subscribed to renowned scientific journals, imported medical and philosophical texts, and filled their margins with notes in his small, distinctive handwriting. Somewhere in those pages, he believed, lay a truth that could help him - not merely to live longer, but to comprehend his illness.

Alongside science, he turned to literature. Rabindra Rachanabali became his spiritual refuge. In Tagore's songs, stories, and essays, he found the peace that medical texts could not provide - a way to embrace suffering without bitterness.

Even when he could no longer go to the college, he stayed mentally engaged. He dictated notes for students, helped my mother with accounts, and welcomed young scholars seeking guidance. A poor man hired for household chores eventually became part of our family, witnessing both his strength and vulnerability.

Though disease weakened his body, it did not diminish his spirit. His lifelong quest - for knowledge, meaning, and hope - continued until the end.

He left us far too early, at the age of forty, but whenever I open the attic trunk filled with his underlined scientific journals and fragile notes, it feels as though he is near once more.

Modern medicine has made many once-fatal diseases manageable. But my father, who had none of these advantages, was never defeated. Through science, philosophy, and Tagore's timeless words, he fought not merely for life, but for dignity, understanding, and serenity.

News Items

VICEROY’S MESSAGE

“PRECIOUS MEMORIES” OF QUEEN MOTHER

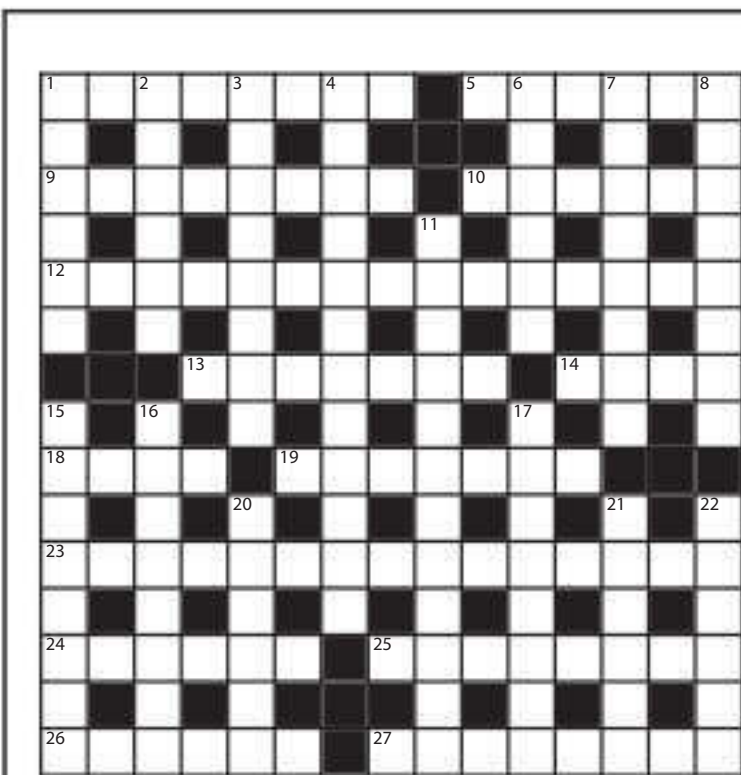
The following telegram has been received from His Majesty the King- Emperor by His Excellency the Viceroy, dated Sandringham, November 20, 1925: — “My dear mother passed peacefully away this afternoon.” The following telegram has been sent by His Excellency the Viceroy to His Majesty the King-Emperor dated November 21, 1925: — “It is with great distress that I have received the message from Your Majesty informing me of the death of Queen Alexandra. On behalf of India I offer Your Majesty with humble duty the deepest sympathy in your loss. “Precious memories of Queen Alexandra, both of her gracious actions as Queen Empress, and of her life of active sympathy with suffering humanity in later years, are treasured in India. “The news of her death will be received with widespread sorrow by the Princes and people of India and universal sympathy* will go out to Your Majesty in your bereavement.”—Viceroy's Camp, November 21, 1925.

CALCUTTA TRIBUTES

RACES AND SOCIAL EVENTS ABANDONED

Flags flying at half-mast over official, business and private buildings and the abandonment of many forms of business and amusement marked the observance of the melancholy event in Calcutta. The Bengal Secretariat and attached offices, the High Court, the Municipal Offices and Police Courts were all closed, and the race meeting at Tollygunge was cancelled. Although the city hummed last evening with the bustle of its tremendous cold weather traffic, everywhere there was a marked restraint. Evening dances which had been arranged at Firpo's, the Grand Hotel and the Palais de Danse were abandoned. In Northern Calcutta, too, signs were not wanting of the regret with which the Indian community generally heard the news.

Crossword | No. 293300



Last Sunday's Solution

NEUROBIOLOGY
T T N O T E A E
A D H O M I N E M N O M A D
G E E A B R N I
A C R O S S V I E H E M E N T
B R E S S O
A S T R A Y S U P P L I T T E R
O G B P R A
H A P P E N O N F A U C E T
E H O T G I
C R E O S O T E I M P A R T
K A W C W A B O
L E V E E A F O R T I O R T
E V E M O I D S
S T U P E F A C I E N T

ACROSS

- All in, cold buffet (4,4)
- French cultural organisation withdraw Monet's one artwork (6)
- Olympian takes a little paracetamol after surprise parties (5-3)
- Restyle Elvis occasionally, coming back lithe ... (6)
- ... and slim in cute pants, in charge for film soundtrack, maybe (10,5)
- Weaklings save seconds -

- swapping cold for hot (7)
- Average American soldier (4)
- Universal veto for operating system (4)
- Display some ingredients of garibaldi - or a macaroon (7)
- Evita's touring cast feel caring, delivering flyer (9,6)
- Judge in drug haze reportedly (6)
- A battalion rebel over scene of bloodshed (8)
- Confront accountant about expenditure (6)

- Well I never! Disheartened after wife leaves, returning to cause some kind of alarm (8)
- DOWN
- Replacn the soundtrack for Grease (6)
- Guarantee cry of pain after case of Viagra's used up (6)
- Spreads content leaving bloggers' cycling thread on board (8)
- Doctor depicts pain involving bit of

- intestine with this complaint (12)
- Vicar meets a politician and pimp (6)
- French race track's finale elevated by South African representative, perhaps (8)
- Hide under excessive clothing (8)
- Cigarette butt from corpse keeps me over a barrel, identifying a variety of contacts (3-9)
- Write about love - a newspaper man's first - expressed in legal document (8)

- Quote bareheaded, ancient, Celtic priest, looking towards the stars - it'll get you going (8)
- Call one out following poor BAME representation - prepare defence (8)
- Earl and headless monster going out (6)
- Tolkien's goblins recalled essence of yellow parchment, say (6)
- Desperate U-turn over Europe, ultimately deceptive (6)

NOTE: Figures in parentheses denote the number of letters in the words required. (By arrangement with The Independent, London)



Former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina of Bangladesh has been sentenced to death for alleged crimes against humanity linked to the July 2024 student uprising. The verdict, delivered amid escalating anti-India sentiment and a volatile electoral landscape, has sharpened political divides at home and placed New Delhi in an unusually delicate diplomatic position

Chaos and confusion in the neighbourhood

Bangladesh is headed for further political uncertainty and a possible descent into turmoil and instability given the recent developments related to the verdict convicting former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina (PMSH) of crimes against humanity. After the events in July-August 2024, which led to violence, the ouster of the government, and her subsequent arrival in India on a special military aircraft, PMSH has been given safe haven by India.

This has understandably led to further tensions in bilateral ties, which have been progressively worsening since PMSH left Dhaka and the installation of an interim government (IG) led by Chief Advisor Mohammad Yunus, who has made clear his animosity towards India and his increasing proximity to Pakistan and China and, to an extent, the United States. While there had been general dissatisfaction with the dictatorial manner in which PMSH was running the government, there was economic growth in Bangladesh with an increase in GDP figures, and her government's policies had set the path towards Bangladesh exiting the Least Developed Country category by 2026. However, that may not happen now, as student protests against job quota reforms picked up after PMSH labelled them as "grandchildren of the Razakars" who supported the Pakistani military's operations in the 1971 liberation war and were accused of heinous crimes. The use of the term further escalated the protests as students felt slighted and considered her response dismissive of their efforts to address the quota system in government jobs, which reserved around 30 per cent of jobs for descendants of the freedom fighters of the 1971 Liberation Movement.

As the violence increased and the government responded with a heavy hand, leading to the deaths of some protesters, the situation inflamed and demands for PMSH's resignation increased, eventually forcing her to flee the country for India. The government failed to recognise the mood on the ground, especially after the opposition's boycott of the general elections in January 2024 and the groundswell of anti-government sentiment. PMSH's tenure in power from 2009 to 2024 was

marked by strong economic growth but also by a strong crackdown on dissent, extra-judicial killings, and alleged human rights violations. After PMSH left the country, tensions eased somewhat and the Bangladesh Army announced the setting up of an interim government (IG) to run Bangladesh. The chaos that followed saw widespread destruction, and violence continued for some time before there was relative calm along with demands for accountability for those killed.

The Yunus-led interim government has been mandated to focus on reforms in the system and there is an opportunity to take Bangladesh out of the quagmire and put it on a transformative path to rebuild democracy and ensure security and stability, though there are many questions about the likelihood of this happening given the IG's approach. The IG's decision to put PMSH on trial in the country's International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) and her conviction, in absentia, on charges of human rights violations, and the award of the death sentence, has once again put Bangladesh in the spotlight and its future at a crossroads. The verdict marks the end of a political dynasty and PMSH's political journey and her 15-year tenure at the helm of the country.

After much pressure, Bangladesh's IG has announced general elections in February 2026 along with a referendum on the July National Charter, which offers a direction and roadmap for structural reforms. It proposes introducing time limits for prime ministerial terms and scrapping the first-past-the-post system for proportional representation, thereby rewriting the rules of Bangladesh's politics. While these reforms are supported by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the Jamaat-e-Islami (Jel), and other smaller parties, they are not supported by the student-led Bangladesh Citizens Party (NCP). This, along with the proposed ban on the Awami League's participation in the forthcoming elections, does not augur well for

Bangladesh. The death sentence for PMSH and demands for her extradition from India are symptoms of the compromised judicial system and flawed policy approach of the interim government, exposing it to charges of bias and a predetermined verdict.

The ICT's mandate was changed in an unconstitutional manner, and the Chief Prosecutor in the case was a Jel lawyer who had defended 1971 war criminals. PMSH was also not allowed to choose her defence lawyers. India has refused to send back PMSH, stating that any decision must follow due process and align with the bilateral Extradition Treaty between India and Bangladesh, which clearly exempts extradition "for an offence of a political character" (Article 6). For India, Bangladesh is an important neighbour and there is a need to keep the relationship as amicable as possible. But the growing clout of pro-Pakistan elements in Bangladesh's polity and the undermining of the Awami League and its supporters pose challenges for India's approach to the new government after the proposed elections.



MANJU SETH
Former Ambassador



ANKITA SANYAL
Research Fellow at the International Centre for Peace Studies, New Delhi

The Hasina verdict and implications for India

On November 17, Bangladesh's International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) sentenced former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to death for crimes against humanity related to last year's student-led July Uprising, which resulted in the deaths of as many as 1,400 civilians and injuries to over 20,000. The much-awaited judgment is historic for many reasons. For the first time in Bangladesh's history, a court has handed down such a severe punishment to a political figure of her stature. This verdict also arrives at a critical moment in the nation's politics - barely two months before the 13th Jatiya Sangsad elections. Sheikh Hasina, who has been residing in New Delhi since fleeing Dhaka on 5 August 2024, rejected the verdict, calling it 'biased and politically motivated'. Nevertheless, this judgment places New Delhi in a difficult position, as Dhaka has, quite predictably, requested India to extradite her.

The interim government, following its establishment in August 2024, introduced amendments to the ICT Act (1973) in late 2024 to address crimes related to the July Uprising and the ensuing political violence. The ordinance under-

went three rounds of amendments this year-in February, May, and September-expanding the ICT's authority and designating Sheikh Hasina and other accused individuals as 'fugitives'. Trials against Hasina and others officially began in June this year, a month after the interim government banned her party, the Awami League, under the Anti-Terrorism Ordinance. This move followed protests in April and May by Islamic parties and the National Citizen Party (NCP), demanding that national elections be held only after the completion of the July trials and the announcement of the July Charter. Clearly, such pressure appeared to work, and the interim government complied with both demands.

Chaired by Justice Golam Mortuza Mozumder, the three-member ICT bench read portions of the 453-page judgment in a verdict live-streamed on Bangladesh Television. In videos presented by the investigating officers, subtitles claimed among other things that "Sheikh Hasina asked Delhi to attack Dhaka" and presented several pieces of evidence purportedly demonstrating that Hasina ordered forceful action against the students during the uprising. While BDMilitary.com, an independent defence and strategic affairs digital platform run by Bangladesh's former defence veterans (founded in 2005), published an article titled "Sheikh Hasina begged India to attack Dhaka," no credible Bangladeshi media outlets reported this, clearly indicating that the documentary evidence claimed by the ICT was not accepted by the media in Bangladesh.

The ICT hearing also criticised the now-banned Awami League party, prohibited from contesting the upcoming national election. The chief prosecutor, Mohammad Tajul Islam, summarising witness testimonies, labelled the Awami League 'fascist' from the very inception of independent Bangladesh, accusing the party's government of concentrating on perpetuating its power through exploitation, torture, curtailing funda-

mental rights, denying social justice and democracy, and eventually establishing a dictatorship by forming BAKSAL. He further claimed that, led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the Awami League government formed the infamous Rakhi Bahini (a paramilitary force created in 1972) "in connivance with a neighbouring country to weaken and abolish our glorious Army," and that Sheikh Hasina did similar things after returning to power in 2008. The reading also indirectly blamed New Delhi for Bangladesh's alleged democracy deficit since its liberation.

Anti-India sentiments in Bangladesh, long nurtured by anti-League factions, have escalated since the fall of the Hasina regime. Many have concluded that New Delhi was responsible for Sheikh Hasina's autocracy and the last three rigged elections.

After the July Uprising, these sentiments have been echoed within the interim government, often blaming New Delhi for domestic law and order issues-from the demolition of 32 Dhanmondi to unrest in Khagrachhari-and making unsubstantiated accusations that New Delhi "disapproved of" and "disliked" the student-led July protest. Critics have indirectly held India responsible for rendering SAARC 'nearly defunct'. Major political parties like BNP, Jamaat, and NCP have pushed the narrative that "countering Indian hegemony" is central to Bangladesh's foreign policy, following its reset under the Yunus government. Lastly, Sheikh Hasina's exile in India has been cited as the principal cause of strained bilateral relations.

The ICT verdict on Hasina received praise across political parties, who claimed that justice had been served. The interim government called it "historic," while Chief Advisor Yunus asserted that the conviction affirmed that "no one is above the law."

The NCP called for the swift execution of the sentence and Hasina's immediate repatriation from New Delhi, urging India not to shelter "killer Sheikh Hasina." Jamaat-e-Islami welcomed the verdict, stating that this trial met ICT standards, unlike previous trials against Jamaat members.



CONTINUED ON >> P14

CONTINUED ON >> P14

The tumultuous journey of Sheikh Hasina

GYANESHWAR DAYAL

The history of Bangladesh begins with Sheikh Mujib the legendary leader who rose against the powerful Pakistan army and attained independence after a struggle that was both difficult and long. Lovingly called 'Bangabandhu,' he was a person admired and revered across the nation for achieving the impossible. After the surrender of Pakistan East Pakistan became what is now Bangladesh.

A nation was born and charted on a journey of progress and development under its benevolent leader. However, destiny had other plans. What began with a promising note in 1971 ended on an abrupt note when Bangabandhu and his family members were assassinated in a military coup. Hasina and her sister survived

because they were abroad at the time. That trauma defined Sheikh Hasina's political persona. Sheikh Hasina, the surviving daughter inherited her father's legacy, goodwill and burden at the same time and charted on a political journey that would shape the destiny of small Bengali-speaking nation. Her rise, endurance, and eventual downfall are intertwined with the history of a nation that showed promise and even outpaced Pakistan but fell to political machinations.

She showed courage and determination when she returned from exile in 1981, and took over the leadership of the Awami League. The journey was not smooth though. She struggled to restore the democracy in the nation and finally succeeded. Her fight for democracy was marked by fierce rivalry, political crackdowns,

and highhandedness of the army. With a mix of persistence and political instinct, she became the accepted custodian of Bangabandhu's unfinished mission — to see a thriving democratic Bangladesh. Eventually Hasina became prime minister in 1996, marking the beginning of her long political dominance. Sheikh Hasina's tenure as Prime Minister of Bangladesh began on 23 June 1996, when she assumed office after her party, the Awami League, won the general election, succeeding Khaleda Zia's Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). Her first term lasted until 15 July 2001. After a while she returned to office on 6 January 2009 following her party's landslide victory in the 2008 general election and won subsequent elections in 2014, 2018 and 2024. Her ascent of power coincided naturally with good relations

with India and period of growth and prosperity that was fast and sustained. Her governments saw major infrastructure projects, impressive growth indicators, social welfare expansions, and a consolidation of nationalist politics centred on the liberation. During her rule Bangladesh transformed into one of South Asia's fastest-growing economies. However, the torchbearer of democracy herself succumbed to autocratic traits and alienated a large section of people — giving sops to her supporters and brickbats to opponents — something that eventually led to Gen Z uprising and her ignominious downfall.

The abolition of the caretaker government system, the crackdown on opposition parties, and allegations of human rights abuses made her look authoritarian leader who wanted to

retain power at all costs. The 2024 student uprising was the turning point. What began as anger over job quotas and governance failures quickly transformed into a nationwide movement challenging Hasina's prolonged rule. Her government's response-marked by repression, arrests, and violence-fuelled unprecedented public fury. As unrest spread, her political fortress began to crumble. After the uprising she moved to India where she currently lives but the International Crimes Tribunal's death sentence has changed the situation and India will have to take a call on her extradition as an extradition treaty warrants that she goes back to her home country and is penalised as per the law. Till that happens her fate hangs in uneasy balance.

Paparazzi as encroachers



Gen Z may know about Lady Diana but may not be aware of the reason her early death occurred in a car crash in 1997. As per the report of the British inquest, Operation Paget, it was concluded that the high-speed car crash resulted from the negligent driving of their driver, as well as the pursuing paparazzi. Lady Diana had, on various occasions, expressed her displeasure at the unusual media interest in her troubled life. It is, then, indeed tragic that her life was cut short by exactly the same forces. I recall this episode vividly because, as a teenager who admired her, I was shaken by what our collective hunger for her life was, which could have led the paparazzi to get more of her, earn more from her, and ultimately led to her death.

I see a similar pattern that, until recent times, did not prevail in India; that is, India is now moving from curiosity to voyeurism. Let me also say it is not merely the paparazzi or the mobile holders wanting a piece of the celebrity pie, but also the content seekers who keep looking for more - to go viral, to monetise, to break new stories, to start new gossip. India's entertainment industry has grown by leaps and bounds over the last few decades, bringing with it not just global recognition but also the relentless media gaze.

The emergence of a paparazzi culture because of multiple media platforms has also led to a disturbing trend: the erosion of privacy, dignity, and respect for public figures. There is, of course, a caveat: the celebrity-paparazzi culture is an incestuous love-hate reality where both cannot do without each other due to the constant need to be visible, yet seek privacy between personal and public curiosity.

However, the very notion of privacy for public personalities has changed considerably. Increasingly, 'known faces' have little control, or even awareness, over when they might become a viral moment, simply because anyone who recognises them can record and share their presence without consent. This is why I feel India will need to rewrite itself to the rules of privacy, and that shift should begin at the school education level.

This column is triggered by the recent illness and hospitalisation of the country's much-loved veteran hero, Dharmendra. He, in the past, had often expressed his discomfort at being photographed during private family gatherings or personal outings. There are many instances in which he has requested privacy, only to have those appeals disregarded by persistent photographers. Yet recently, when he was rushed to the hospital, his earlier pleas went unheeded again, and an entire shameful episode of peeping toms was carried out. The



PRIYANKA CHATURVEDI

gave the media a lesson on privacy after his father returned home, the message resonated with everyone who was viewing the content on his health beyond the medical bulletin and updates from family.

The coverage was so intrusive that even the pizzas delivered to their home were being reported with visuals. Before that, there was the deeply shameful episode in which news of the legendary actor's supposed passing was reported by all major news channels. It took the Mathura MP and wife of Dharmendra, HemaMalini, to publicly call them out. The rush to be first past the post, the news breakers, the TRP seekers - aka the vultures - often forget about the dignity and privacy of the families involved in their TRP news.

Similar video leaks emerged of the late Rishi Kapoor too, from the hospital he was in, and one could only feel sorry for the family grappling with grief while at the same time being subjected to constant media interest.

There are so many more examples that can be added - Sridevi, Sushant Singh Rajput and even Zarine Khan. A young actress of KaantaLaga fame, ShefaliZariwala, who was popular with the paparazzi, passed away suddenly. Attempts were made to weave a conspiracy where none existed, exposing the ugliness of the thriving conspiracy theory industry.

This finally brings me to the brave Rhea Chakraborty. In 2020, when the news of the tragic suicide of actor Sushant Singh Rajput was announced, in parallel, we saw an unprecedented media frenzy, with Rhea Chakraborty, his girlfriend, placed squarely in the spotlight. Her daily life became a public spectacle; even mundane acts like entering her apartment or visiting

paparazzi were not just reporting his visitors but also exploiting their emotions. It did not stop there; they also circulated a particularly vulnerable video of the actor with his family inside the hospital room.

When "Dhai Kilo kaHaath" fame actor and former MP Sunny Deol gave the media a lesson on privacy after his father returned home, the message resonated with everyone who was viewing the content on his health beyond the medical bulletin and updates from family.



a police station were turned into viral moments.

The coverage often crossed ethical boundaries, turning her into a target of public vilification and bearing resemblance to the witch-hunts of earlier centuries. The media was relentless, the conspiracy theories went out of hand, and her being jailed was considered retribution. Not one person from this culture class wanted to hear what she had to say because they were catering to a class that had been led to believe she was responsible.

Today, after having long fought not just for her bail but also her innocence and her passport, no one has the guts or the gumption to even offer her an apology. What I figure about Rhea is that she understands how the system runs, and she is now using the very medium to rebuild her place within it. Similar is the case of Aryan Khan - a public spectacle of a made-up drug case, arrest, and later bail - even through it all, his response was silence, and later via his directorial debut, he explained what he stands for without the need to spell it out.

The right to privacy is a fundamental human right, and respect for individual dignity is the cornerstone of a civilised society. The ongoing violation of these rights under the guise of entertainment journalism is a worrying trend. Media houses, photographers, and fans alike must introspect and adopt practices that balance public curiosity with decency and empathy. So, while celebrities do live in the public eye, the assumption that their every moment is fair game for public consumption is deeply problematic.

India's burgeoning paparazzi culture reflects not just the appetite for celebrity news but also a deeper societal shift towards sensationalism over sensitivity. The various stories I have shared, of those I recall, serve as a stark reminder of the urgent need to restore dignity and respect to the lives of those who entertain and inspire us. Fame should not come at the cost of humanity; it is time for the lens to shift, for both the media and the audience, from voyeurism to responsible engagement.

The writer is a Member of the Rajya Sabha

Dhwani unveils annual award to celebrate classical arts excellence



From (L-R) Krishan Mohan Mishra, Vaswati Misra, Ustad Amjad Ali Khan and Prashant Tewari from The Pioneer Group

SAKSHI PRIYA

The evening's programme on 18 November opened up with the inauguration of a photo exhibition tracing the life and artistic journey of Pandit Shambhu Maharaj, while also highlighting the evolution of Kathak in the decades following Independence. "We wanted future generations to know how it all started, who the key people were, and how the students of Shambhu Maharaj took Kathak across India and abroad and propagated this dance form," says Kathak exponent Vaswati Misra, President of Dhwani and daughter-in-law of Shambhu Maharaj, married to his eldest son, Krishan Mohan Misra. The exhibition brings together an array of photographs depicting Shambhu Maharaj, his family, his disciples, moments from his performances, and the recognitions he received in the early years of his career. It offers a visual narrative not only of the maestro's artistic brilliance but also of the lineage that shaped modern Kathak.

The cultural richness of the evening will continue with a series of performances. Among them is a Kathak duet by Ipsita Misra, granddaughter of Pandit Shambhu Maharaj, who will perform alongside Daniel Freddy.

The event will conclude with a sitar recital by Padma Shri Ustad Shahid Parvez, accompanied by Ustad Akram Khan on the tabla, offering the audience a fitting finale that blends rhythmic mastery with melodic depth. Reflecting on the current cultural landscape, Misra acknowledges the abundance of talent but stresses the need for deeper commitment. "Young generations have to understand the depth of this form. Kathak has the potential to transform you, to make you a better human being, to give you a vision of life," she says. Founded in 1984, Dhwani is a registered non-profit



Ustad Akram Khan on Tabla and Padma Shri Ustad Shahid Parvez

organisation recognised by the Government of India and empanelled with the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) and the Ministry of Culture. Under the leadership of Vaswati Misra, Dhwani has performed widely across India and internationally - including in Japan, the United States, South Africa, Germany, Italy, Sweden, and Canada, presenting thematic productions that blend traditional sensibilities with contemporary vision.

A significant highlight of the evening will be the formal announcement of the Dhwani Shambhu Smriti Puraskar, an annual award instituted to honour excellence in music and dance. For its inaugural edition, the selection committee has named Padma Vibhushan Ustad Amjad Ali Khan, for his great contribution to Hindustani instrumental music and Guru Dr Maya Rao (posthumously) as the first awardees.

"Their contributions are immense and unparalleled," Misra notes, adding that the committee reached the decision unanimously. She emphasises that the award criteria will remain flexible, allowing future editions to also recognise emerging talents who show exceptional promise and merit. Guest of honour Shri Prashant Tewari from The Pioneer newspaper facilitated the eminent award recipients and handed over the award and shawls to the



Photo exhibition on Abhinaya Chakrawarty Shri Shambhu Maharaj



Kathak duet by Daniel Freddy and Ipsita Misra (granddaughter of Pt Shambhu Maharaj)

two distinguished awardees.

The institution of the Dhwani Shambhu Smriti Puraskar marks an important milestone in Dhwani's journey, reaffirming its commitment to preserving India's classical traditions and creating plat-

forms that honour artistic excellence. Smriti 2025 stands both as a tribute to Pandit Shambhu Maharaj's enduring influence and as a continuation of the legacy that Misra and Dhwani tirelessly strive to uphold.



The Hasina verdict and implications for India

Jamaat also demanded India extradite the ousted prime minister, arguing that "if one claims to behave as a good neighbour, if one aspires to maintain friendly relations, this is their foremost responsibility." Earlier, BNP accused India of "creating opportunities for sabotage in Bangladesh by giving shelter to fugitive Sheikh Hasina."

In stark contrast, international human rights organisations-including Human Rights Watch, the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, and Amnesty International-have expressed serious concerns over the

fairness of the ICT trial. They noted that the verdict against Hasina, delivered in absentia, violated international law standards despite claims by the ICT that it followed the Rome Statute. Concerns about the trial process were also raised by 120 journalists from various media outlets in a joint statement, observing that the ICT proceedings presented 'one-sided information' and were visibly politically influenced. The government's appointment of a state lawyer known for bias against the opposition as Hasina's defence counsel was also deemed 'absurd'.

Bangladesh's interim government has renewed its request to India to extradite Sheikh Hasina and former Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal, both currently

exiled in New Delhi. It asserts that India is under a 'legal obligation' as per the India-Bangladesh Extradition Treaty of 2013 to comply. The government stresses that granting asylum to those convicted of crimes against humanity would be "extremely unfriendly and demeaning to justice".

India's Ministry of External Affairs issued a statement affirming that "as a close neighbour, India is committed to the best interests of the people of Bangladesh, including peace, democracy, inclusion and stability in that country," and that New Delhi will "always engage constructively with all stakeholders to that end." As the ICT prepares to seek Interpol's assistance for the repatriation of both Hasina and Kamal through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the extradition

treaty provides New Delhi with ample grounds to decline Hasina's extradition-an increasingly likely scenario.

With anti-India sentiment at its peak and Bangladesh's political parties evidently making relations with New Delhi conditional on Hasina's extradition, it appears that New Delhi's relations with Dhaka are poised for a protracted winter.

Chaos and confusion...

The actions of the current interim government appear dictated by Pakistan-backed Jel and other Islamist outfits, which reportedly hijacked the peaceful student protests and were at the forefront of the violence that erupted in July-August 2024. The IG has looked the other way,

allowing mobs to take revenge and kill Awami League workers and even minorities; journalists and civil society activists have been jailed.

The IG has labelled these incidents as political violence or Indian propaganda. India is continuing with trade, energy cooperation, and supply of essential commodities and is being patient, keeping in mind the unpredictability of Bangladesh's future course as it realigns itself with Pakistan, which has even spoken about a three-front attack on India.

India would like to see free, fair, and inclusive elections in February 2026 and build a strong bilateral partnership, but the rising influence of radical religious and anti-India elements will present India with difficult choices and challenges in rebalancing ties.

FROM AGENDA COVER

Opinion

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 23, 2025



British golfer Ian Poulter's outfits are bold, polished, patriotic, and dramatic

Fashion crimes: Why we dress like lost rockstars



GOLF IS A sport known for silence, discipline, polite clapping, and scorecards that can humble the strongest souls. But beneath this serene surface lies a wild, chaotic, rebellious streak—one that does not show up in our swings, our strategy, or our calm expressions. It shows up in our clothes.

Yes, I'm talking about the fashion crimes of golf—those loud trousers, neon caps, retina-blinding shirts, and colour combinations so catastrophic they could trigger a weather alert. If the rest of the world assumes golfers dress like CEOs on vacation, they clearly haven't seen the full circus. And before I throw anyone under the golf cart, let me confess: I, Rahil Gangjee, was once a fully active participant in these crimes.

If you dig up my old photos, you will find a younger version of me wearing shades of orange, yellow, turquoise, and bright blue that had no business existing on fabric. At one point, I'm pretty sure I wore a shade of green that wasn't legal in most countries. My closets were basically a tropical bird sanctuary. The logic, back then, was simple: "If I can't intimidate them with my distance, maybe I can blind them."

My fashion misadventures (a confession)

When you're young on the tour, you think you're invincible. You also think the louder your clothes, the better your golf will magically become. Something about bright clothing gives you a false sense of power—like wearing fluorescent gives you +10 yards off the tee.

I'd walk onto a tee box feeling like a superhero, only to top the first shot 40 yards. Nothing humbles you faster than chunking a wedge while wearing a shirt that looks like it's sponsored by a Holi festival.

Once walked into the locker room wearing a coral-pink trouser and sunshine-yellow shirt. One senior pro looked at me and said: "Rahil, are you playing golf or auditioning for a boyband?"

And honestly? He had a point. I looked like a backup dancer who got lost on the way to rehearsal. But trust me—I wasn't alone.

The legends of loud: Daly & Poulter

Some golfers commit small fashion mistakes. But then there are the professionals—the ones who have taken golf fashion crimes and turned them into a full-blown art form.

John Daly: The patron saint of psychedelic trousers. John's pants are not clothes. They are emotional experiences. Patterns with swirls, dragons, skulls, exploding colours, and designs that look like they were created by someone who drank five Red Bulls and fell asleep on Photoshop. His trousers scream, "Subtlety is for amateurs." The amazing part? He owns it. John Daly could walk into a boardroom wearing flamingo-print trousers and no one would question it. That's the power of commitment.

Ian Poulter: Ah, Poulter—the high priest of golfing couture. Poulter doesn't wear clothes; he *curates* them. His wardrobe deserves a museum wing. His outfits are bold, polished, patriotic, and dramatic all at once. That Union Jack pants moment? Iconic. Half the crowd cheered. The other half called their optometrists.

Between Daly and Poulter, golfers grew up believing that fashion should stun, shock, and occasionally cause minor eye injuries.

Why golfers dress like lost rockstars

I've had years to think about this. And I've come to the conclusion that golfers dress loudly because the sport doesn't allow any

other rebellion. Think about it:

- Can't shout
- Can't dive
- Can't pump your fist too aggressively
- Can't celebrate like footballers
- And definitely can't tackle your playing partner (even if he takes 7 minutes over a putt).

So where does all that pent-up personality go? Into the clothes.

Golf fashion is the quiet man's rebellion. Our version of a rockstar smashing a guitar is wearing trousers loud enough to wake the dead. We're basically rockstars—just the very lost, very well-behaved variety.

When fashion fights back

A friend once told me, "Wear colours that complement your game." So I wore muted greys and whites one week. Shot 78. Next week, I wore a neon orange cap just for fun. Shot 70. Coincidence? Absolutely. But will you ever convince a superstitious golfer otherwise? Never. Golfers are a funny breed. We're capable of analysing the biomechanics of a swing down to the angle of our toenail, but we'll also genuinely believe that a lime-green belt improves our bunker play.

I've also seen young kids turn up at the range looking like they survived an explosion at a paint factory—fluorescent from head to toe—and hit the ball beautifully. Meanwhile, I'm in my calm, dignified navy shirt...struggling to hit greens. Fashion has a sense of humour.

Growing older, growing wiser...

Today, I've retired from the neon brigade. I've officially grown out of my "blinding the spectators" phase. My wardrobe now has shades that fall within the human-vision-safe spectrum. Blues, whites, charcoals—colours that say: "I'm here to play golf, not to direct traffic."

But every time I see a teenager walk in wearing electric purple trousers or a cap that glows in the dark, I smile. Because that used to be me. And because golf needs these characters. Without bold outfits, golf becomes too serious, too stiff, too...beige.

The new generation's fashion experiments

The youngsters today are taking loud dressing to another level:

- Hoodies on tour
- Joggers on the fairway
- Shoes that look like space gear
- Shirts with patterns that would confuse NASA satellites

And I say: good for them. Golf needs energy. It needs expression. Even if that expression occasionally makes playing partners shield their eyes.

Fashion crimes don't save your scorecard

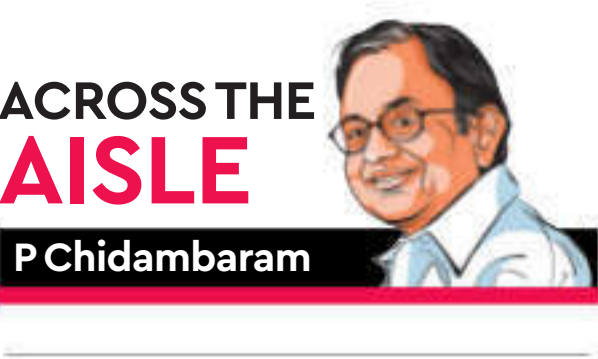
If there's one truth I've learned, it's this: No amount of neon saves you from a triple-bogey. You could be dressed like a disco ball, but if your driver is misbehaving, no pattern in the world will help. Golf will always stay brutally honest, even if your shirt is lying to everyone around you.

Dress loud if you want, but play loud too

To the next generation: Wear what you want. Go bold. Go bright. Go crazy. Just remember—let your golf game shine brighter than your pants. As for me? I've retired my fashion crimes. But they'll forever be part of my story. And honestly, if I ever start missing the old days, maybe I'll buy one pair of outrageous trousers just for nostalgia. But only on a practice day. I don't want the referees filing complaints.

Until next time—dress well, swing well, and don't blind your fellow golfers.

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



There is an invisible censor; there is 24x7 monitoring of all major newspapers and TV channels; there are discreet telephone calls to the editors... Fear is the worst enemy of freedom. India can have either a fear-stricken Press or a free Press

IF YOU HEARD a narrator read the speech, you would have thought that the words belonged to Bal Gangadhar Tilak or Jawaharlal Nehru or Jayaprakash Narayan or Nelson Mandela, and you would be wrong. The speaker was the honourable prime minister, Mr Narendra Modi.

The words will be music to reporters who have tried, in vain for 11 years, to extract a press conference from the prime minister; they may hope, finally, Mr Modi will break his resolve not to answer questions from journalists at a live, televised press conference. The words would reassure editorial writers that they need not be perpetually on guard and write 'balanced' editorials sprinkled with phrases like 'on the one hand' and 'on the other hand'. The words will motivate the naughty artist to take out his pencils and draw cartoons 'sparing no one, not even the prime minister'. The words will be a shot in the arm for editors who have 'buried' numerous stories with a prayer 'Reader forgive me for I know what I do'.

Saluting courage

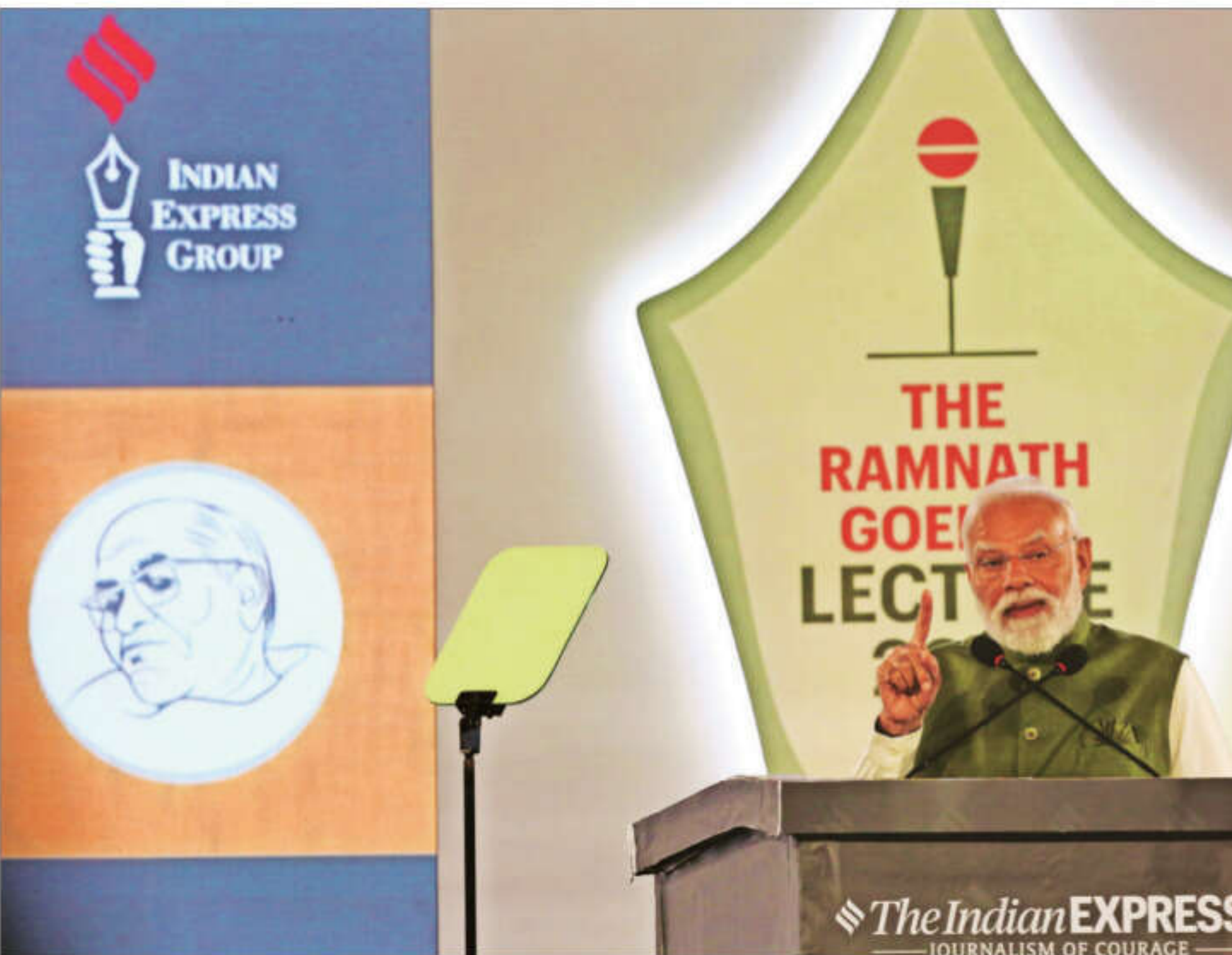
Mr Modi's words were indeed inspiring. Ramnath Goenka's motto was Journalism of Courage. That became the motto of the newspaper that he founded with the same words adorning the masthead every day. Eulogising Ramnath Goenka, the prime minister said: "Ramnathji took a firm stand against British tyranny. In one of his editorials he said that we should prefer to shut down his newspaper rather than follow British orders. Similarly, when an attempt was made to enslave the country again in the form of the Emergency, Ramnathji stood strong. And this year marks 50 years since the Emergency was imposed."

Well said, but what is the reality of the media today? India's prominent



LET ME BEGIN with a confession. I am one of those products of Macaulay's education system that the Prime Minister denounced while delivering the Ramnath Goenka Memorial lecture last week. He said that Thomas Babington Macaulay had created an education system for India that was designed to turn Indians into little brown English people who would be Indian in name only. Absolutely true. I went to a girls' school that was modeled wholly on English public schools. We spoke only English, read only English literature and poetry and knew very, very little about our own country.

It was people of my kind who ruled India after the British packed up their bags and went home. We continued perpetuating the colonial mindset till Narendra Modi became Prime Minister. Before he came along political leaders, high officials, police officers, judges and the men who became generals in the Indian army all came from that same old 'colonial' breed. This did not change in the time of the Bharatiya Janata Party's first Prime Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, because he was totally seduced by the wiles and ways of us colonial types. It is a good thing that we lot are now in the garbage bin of history. But, has the Prime Minister noticed how deeply colonial everything



Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the sixth Ramnath Goenka Memorial Lecture in New Delhi

We welcome the strange voice

newspapers were forged in the furnace of the freedom struggle. Not many people would have imagined that 78 years after Independence they would have to invent the phrase *godi media*. Even as readers and viewers desert them in the thousands, many newspapers and channels flourish thanks to government patronage.

Mr Modi went on to say, "Fifty years ago, The Indian Express showed that even blank editorials can challenge the mentality that seeks to enslave... These stories tell us that Ramnathji always stood by the truth, always placed duty above everything else, no matter how powerful the forces standing against him were."

The stark reality

The inspiring stories of the Fourth Estate have given way to a different genre of stories. For example, there is the story of an editor who was given a cheque for the salary for the remaining years of his contractual term of employment and told to clear out his desk by the end of the day. There is the story of an anchor who had the largest viewership on television, who was told to pack his bags when the owner of the channel changed in what is regarded in the industry as a midnight coup. There are shocking stories of famous journalists who lost their jobs in

the last 10 years and cannot find a job even today.

A few days ago, Mr Yashwant Sinha told a story of a meeting at the Press Club of India to which he was invited to deliver a talk. After the address, while chatting with the journalists, he mildly admonished them for not publishing the remarks that he made occasionally. Everybody was silent, but a young journalist spoke up. He said, "Sir, I'll report your remarks. If I lose my job, will you find me one?" Mr Sinha said he was stunned and simply stated, "Young man, please save your job."

I have a story too: on a cold winter evening, I was having dinner with a journalist at a small restaurant. At about 10 pm, he got a call from his office. He was asked to go back to his residence immediately where an OB van was waiting. His assignment was to read a pre-prepared statement. He promptly excused himself and prepared to leave. I asked him why he did not decline the request and tell his boss to assign the job to another reporter who was already at home. He solemnly said, "I have a mother and father, both old and dependent on me, and I have an EMI on my house." He left with profuse apologies.

Some journalists are driven by greed, and seem to thrive. Others are driven by

fear, and survive. The greed-driven outshout everyone in the business, scream and abuse, and invent outlandish stories. For example, during Operation Sindoor, some journalists broadcast the story that Indian naval ships had encircled Karachi port and Indian troops were poised to enter Karachi city!

Fear and freedom

The stories told by Mr Sinha and me—and others that you have heard—illustrate the fear that pervades throughout the Fourth Estate. Believe me, from what I have been told by informed people and what I have gathered, there is an invisible censor; there *is* 24x7 monitoring of all major newspapers and television channels; there *are* discreet telephone calls to the editors; there *are* advisories and, if they are ignored, there *is* trouble. Many stories are still-born, many are killed. It appears that the only media spared are the small media outlets in Indian languages — *excluding* the Hindi media.

Fear is the worst enemy of freedom. India can have either a fear-stricken Press or a free Press.

Website: pchidambaram.in
X: @Pchidambaram_IN

The colonial mindset

else remains under him?

Days after he delivered his lecture, the BJP government in Maharashtra issued written instructions ordering officials to stand when they spotted an MP or an MLA. I commented on this on 'X' and was deluged with posts from Hindutva types who said this was a valid order because elected representatives of the people take precedence over unelected officials. Why? Are they not supposed to be servants of the people? Is this attitude not a product of that colonial mindset? Does it not make elected officials think of themselves as rulers?

There are other examples of colonial governance that the Prime Minister appears not to have noticed. Why should unelected Governors of our states need to live in palaces in the most expensive residential areas of state capitals? This colonial attitude to housing has a trickle-down effect that is quite remarkable so in rural parts the Collector also lives in palatial accommodation. He is so powerful and so far away from the concerns and problems of rural people that they hesitate to approach him for anything. And yet it is to him they must go if they want to open a small shop in the village or start a small business. There are no collectors in the United Kingdom and never have been. It is a colonial post that should have been abolished decades ago. Most

collectors are trained in colonial governance when they join the Indian Administrative Service.

Colonial governance is not the only thing that perpetuates the 'colonial mindset'; the best Indian schools continue to use English as a medium of instruction, and it is to these schools that our political leaders and high officials send their children. Indian literature, music, poetry, philosophy and languages are still taught in these schools as if they were inferior. The only change that has come is that instead of Indian children aspiring to be little brown English people, they aspire to be little brown American people. Parents who can afford to send their children abroad for higher education now choose American colleges over British ones and they return Indian in name only.

Personally, I believe that learning English is no bad thing because the world has become such a small place. English is the lingua franca of today's world, and this is unlikely to change soon. It is the curriculum of Indian schools that needs to change so that our children learn about India's stupendous contribution to the civilisation of the world. Why is it that with most of our major states governed by BJP chief ministers, school curriculums in government schools continue to teach the same old stuff they were taught when my kind of colonial types ruled India.

Why do we continue to produce Macaulay's children who speak English as their first language that they learn in elite private schools? If they attend government schools, they usually end up being linguistically disabled in English as well as their native tongue because teachers cannot teach either well. Hindutva is the ideology of today but instead of dwelling on such high things as civilisation, it restricts itself to spreading religiosity.

Most adherents of Hindutva that I have met speak passionately these days about how they have finally become 'proud Hindus'. Sadly, when they say this, they generally mean that they have become more religious and go on more pilgrimages than before. They like to spout Sanskrit shlokas and quote the Bhagavad Gita but that is the extent of their knowledge of India's civilisation. They are as dismal a bunch as the Macaulay's children that I grew up with.

For things to really change you need institutions that are led by real historians (not pamphleteers), philosophers, scientists, scholars, linguists, writers and thinkers. These are the people that have been alienated by the religiosity and hate mongering of those who lead the Hindutva movement. These are people whose alienation is rooted in their conviction that Modi is allergic to 'intellectuals'; they stay away from the colonial bungalows in Lutyens' Delhi in which the Prime Minister, his ministers and officials live in homes where British officials once did.

THE ASIAN AGE

23 NOVEMBER 2025



Shreya Sen-Handley

Off the beaten track

No time like present to relish your diversity!

Thirteen years ago, in a column for *The Guardian*, I wrote about taking my tenderly young half-English children to a temple in Leicester to experience their first Durga Puja. Not a patch on the Pujas of Kolkata, with its amazing artistry, dazzling illuminations and epic hustle and bustle, this modest event still managed to capture that spirit of bonhomie. The ‘bhog’ was delicious and generously apportioned, and the organisers warm and welcoming to strangers like us rocking up to their marigold-draped door.

Our gold-and-purple sari-clad baby girl jigged her heart out with the resplendently dressed dancers, who rewarded her with their delight at her impromptu performance. Meanwhile, my toddler son was floored by the mouthwatering Luchi-Aloo-Dum, but bemused by the rapid-fire Bengali swirling around him, having spent his short years hearing his white Englishman father and Indian mother communicating in English, decided to join in with a resonating exit in SPANISH, “Adios Amigos!”

Causing much hilarity around him, it also convinced me to keep them attuned to their Indian heritage. Growing up in a lively but undiverse British city, without Indian family or community around us, we knew it would be up to us to provide them with a well-rounded upbringing. Giving them beautiful Sanskrit names (short ones so locals wouldn’t struggle with them, yet they did), we dished up delicious Indian nosh frequently, keeping the Indian connection crackling through weekly videocalls and annual trips back, not to mention our inventive immersion in desi festivities, and they lapped it all up, fortunately.

Celebrating Diwali late this year because of school exams, we joyfully carried home sheesh kebabs, samosas, jalebis, aachars and mango lassi from the nearest Indian deli, cooking two kinds of daal and a big pot of mutton-aloo-gobi to go with it, as our teenagers lit twinkling diyas to the strains of Anoushka Shankar. Transported back to my vow of thirteen years ago, to keep the Indian fires burning for our progeny, it felt like we’d succeeded in shaping two open-minded, altruistic, global citizens, a lot Indian and enormously British.

Both children have half-jokingly striven to out-desi the other, but being British-born and bred, with British schooling and accents, and half-white genes (more obvious in my Mediterranean-looking son than my doe-eyed and dusky daughter), they’re as British as Shakespeare, Cadbury’s and Annie Lennox (Best of British, in other words). Talking of The Bard, coming from an Anglicized, widely-travelled Calcutta clan as I have, I’ve encouraged their love for British literature, theatre, history and entertainment, more even than their environment and many a white Briton with their own children. Our multicultural, empathetic and modern worldview has neither been rued nor questioned, by us or any other.

Until now, when the brown and black are constantly challenged to prove how British they are. If white supremacists and violent racists have been shadowy, slaving monsters all these years, existing beyond the pale of our everyday world, or even better, consigned to history, they’ve come out in force. They live next door; take a corner and you’ll see fascist flags flying from many windows. They flourish in the headlines too, making them ever-present rather than distant, crawling out from under the slimy rubble that was their natural home. Now they’re in every home and venerated; Nigel Farage, Robert Jenrick, and Katie Hopkins, amongst others.

POC are under siege instead. Not only facing daily vilification, abuse and threats from politicians and press, but the general populace. An Indian grandad is murdered by white teenagers whilst innocuously walking his dog. Several South Asian women are raped in the space of a few weeks in “racially aggravated” attacks. A highflying professional woman in a hijab is refused service in a shop, and she’s far from alone but the only one who was heard. It’s happened to me too, a brown woman in everyday Western clothes, blanked in an ice-cream parlour in Cornwall, which I’d imputed to their notorious insularity. But no, it is no longer relegated to dark corners, demonstrated by the summer of openly racist, violent riots we endured last year.

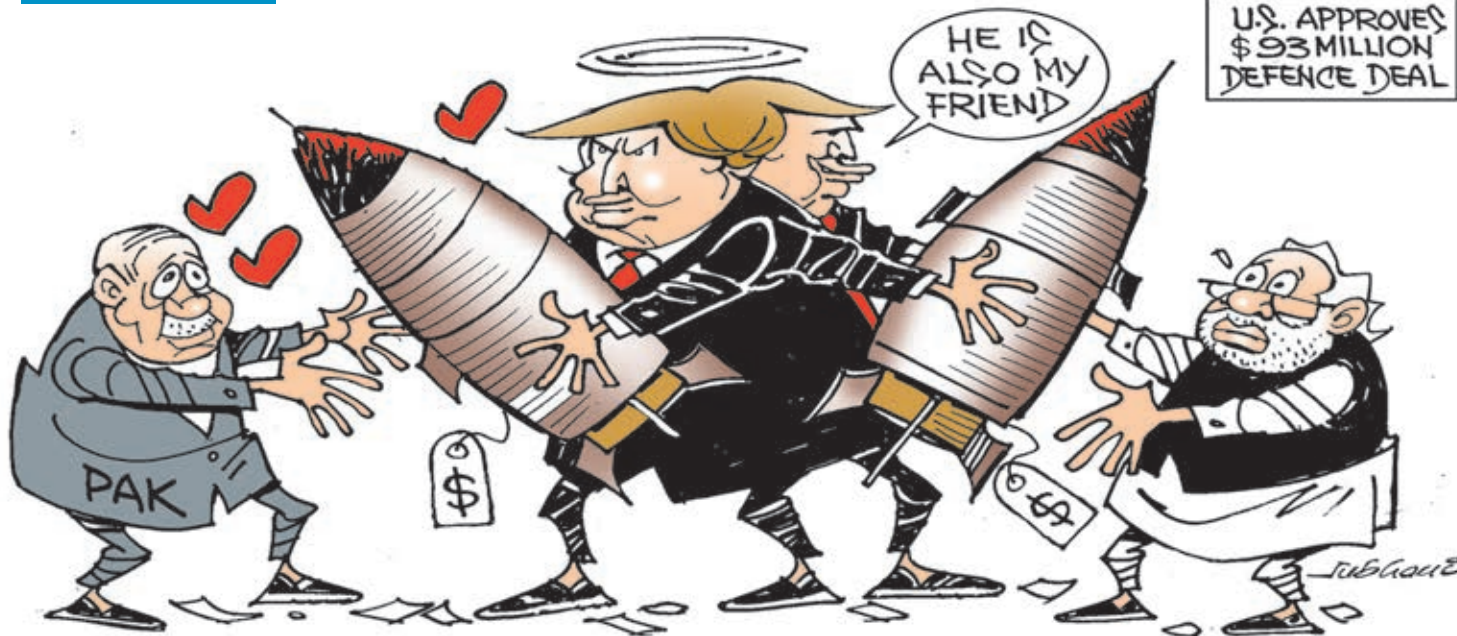
Sadly, Britain’s not alone in this. Europe’s witnessed a horrifying resurgence of fascism, with a few far right leaders like Italy’s Giorgia Meloni having seized control, while the likes of France’s Marine La Pen hover on the brink of power. And need anything more be said about Trump’s takeover of the US? This self-appointed beacon of democracy is now a tinpot dictatorship, but more dangerous than most such banana republics in its rejuvenated imperial ambitions and vast size and strength. This rising tide of aggression against the different and the progressive is swamping all the world.

But then I think — hasn’t it always been there, just papered over in recent decades? When I returned to India after having spent a good chunk of my childhood abroad, I thought and spoke differently to anyone at my school including the teachers, and was routinely punished for it. Made to stand outside the classroom daily to isolate and humiliate me for my “obharatiyo” or un-Indian ways, I stared at my scuffed shoes and plotted my escape. A decade later, after India’s economic liberalisation, I became the youngest regional head of a multinational television channel, and those same teachers were beating down my door for favours for their offspring.

Life will always be cyclical, and the wheel of fortune’s revolutions will set the world to rights again, to a place that prizes diversity and advancement, but as with every other era of encroaching darkness, those who care must light the way.

*Shreya Sen-Handley is the award-winning author of *Memoirs of My Body*, short story collection *Strange and travelogue* *Handle With Care*. She is also a playwright, columnist and illustrator.*

Subhani



If Cong doesn’t transform, new alternative inevitable



Pavan K. Varma

Chanakya’s View

In the recently concluded Assembly elections, the Opposition in Bihar, including the new start-up Jan Suraj, has been decimated. The NDA coalition has swept the polls. A key take-away from these elections, is the steep electoral decline in the Congress, the only national Opposition party. In Bihar the Congress managed to get just six seats, and a meagre vote percentage of 8.7 per cent.

The Indian National Congress was once not merely a political party; it was a national movement, a repository of ideals and a crucible of leadership that shaped the destiny of a new nation. However, today the Congress finds itself in a state of unrelenting atrophy, as if trapped within a mausoleum of its own past glory.

Has the Congress withered away? The question arises with every successive electoral setback. The idea of the Congress is still relevant, but the party that can implement it has tragically unravelled. 1984 was the last time the Congress got an absolute majority. Since then, it has lost a long series of Lok Sabha and state elections. The erosion has been particularly precipitate after 2014, with the rise of the BJP under Narendra Modi. If one adds up all the parliamentary seats the Congress has won in three successive national elections — 2014, 2019 and 2024 — it still adds up to 195, 78 seats less than a simple majority.

Yet what is most striking is the absence of accountability, the refusal to introspect with the rigour that adversity demands. Among all the political formations in the democratic world, few exhibit the baffling ability to endure repeated failure with hardly a semblance of internal upheaval. The Congress appears

locked in a cycle of denial; leadership remains centralised, decision-making opaque, and dissent stifled with both aggression and indifference.

Why is the party bereft of the ability for internal reform? The answer perhaps lies in a structural inversion the party underwent over decades. The Congress that fought colonial rule was a decentralised mosaic of regional leaders, ideological currents, and ground level presence. In recent times, the same Congress has become, increasingly, a dynastic fiefdom, without organisational muscle, rewarding loyalty more than merit.

The Gandhi family cannot but bear a major responsibility for this state of affairs. It has either directly helmed the party during the period of decline, or indirectly been the de facto apex power. In any other organisation, public or private, repeated failure of this nature would have demanded change in leadership. If this has not happened in the Congress it is a myth that there can be no other alternative. However, such is the statis or inexplicable passivity within the party that this has not happened. A putative attempt was made by the so-called ‘G-23’, where some senior leaders attempted to start an internal debate on the need for urgent remedial action. It was a half-hearted and diffident attempt. All that its many meetings achieved was one letter to party president Sonia Gandhi.

But the hostility and aggression with which the family — and the predictable coterie that surrounds it — responded to this well-intentioned attempt, was surprising to say the least. Those who were part of the grouping were almost equated with

The BJP put all its publicity machinery to lampoon Rahul Gandhi, sometimes unfairly. Yet, this expected diatribe from political opponents cannot be the sole cause for the party’s poor performance.

being betrayers encouraging something tantamount to mutiny. Many of the prominent leaders who were part of the group were ostracised, or their role in the party’s management and projection marginalised, leaving them in no doubt that they did not anymore enjoy the trust of the leadership. At least two prominent names come to mind in this context, Shashi Tharoor and Manish Tiwari.

It is true, of course, that the BJP put all its publicity machinery to lampoon Rahul Gandhi, sometimes unfairly and viciously. Yet, this expected diatribe from political opponents cannot be the sole cause for the party’s poor performance. Rahul must understand that memes and social media trolling is amplified precisely because the party continues to stumble from one electoral fiasco to another. Much of the malevolent animosity directed towards him would be neutralised if the electoral performance of the party substantially and qualitatively improves.

Can a new Congress arise from the ashes of the old? Historically, political regeneration in India has often required schism. The Congress itself has witnessed splits that paved the way for reinvention — from the early divisions of the pre-Independence era to the 1969 rupture that created the Congress (O) and Congress (R), eventually redefining the party’s ideological contours. A party so weighed down today by inertia and internal sclerosis may indeed benefit from a decisive moment of reconstitution. New leadership liberated from hereditary entitlement, fresh ideological clarity and, above all, an

organisational revamp rebuilding the party from the grassroots upwards, is imperative. The last is particularly important because even if Rahul Gandhi attracts attention on social media, there can be no substitute for organisational strength which has today almost ceased to exist in many states, of which Bihar is only one example.

The nation must bluntly confront a fundamental truth: Indian democracy cannot flourish without a credible national opposition. A ruling party, however powerful or efficient, must be counterbalanced by an equally persuasive alternative. Democracy is not merely about electoral arithmetic; it is about the constant presence of choice. If one pole becomes overwhelming and the other collapses, the equilibrium that sustains democratic vitality is lost. The existence of a strong Opposition compels introspection within the government, moderates excesses, and enforces accountability.

Regional parties, even if dynamic, are not equipped to offer a cohesive national narrative. They remain anchored to local aspirations, indispensable in their contexts, but incapable of carrying the full weight of India’s pluralistic imagination. The Congress once offered that unifying narrative, one that bridged regions, religions, languages, and classes. Its retreat from that role has seriously narrowed the space for ideological plurality.

If the Congress cannot — or will not — undertake this transformation, then the emergence of a new Congress, or a new alternative, born from the political bankruptcy of the old, may be inevitable. History rarely rewards institutions that refuse to evolve. But it often welcomes new political formations that rise to fill the vacuum left behind. Congress leaders and workers need to act before it is too late.

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

LETTERS

TESTING TIMES

What is Test cricket coming to? On the first day of the Ashes Test in Perth, 19 wickets fell and neither team crossed the 50-over mark. Coming on the back of the Kolkata Test between India and South Africa where the match almost ended on the second day and where again the average overs played by each team was close to 50 in each innings, this is disaster. One cannot but come to the conclusion that our cricket administrators in cahoots with the pitch managers and groundsman are deliberately sabotaging Test cricket at the altar of money from big business and media. Today Test cricket is reduced to 50 overs per innings and it will not be long before we see it reduced to a 20-over format. Adieu Test cricket! Time to make a second Ashes trophy by burning the stumps used at Perth.

S. Kamat
Mysuru

REMAIN SEATED PLEASE

DEVENDRA FADNAVIS, chief minister of Maharashtra, has issued a GR that the government officials should get up to greet MPs and MLAs and be polite to them. From childhood we have been told that “to gain respect, you have to give respect!” Devabhau should have also suggested to these swollen-headed upstart politicians, to make themselves worthy of respect! Further, the civil servants are already servile and sychopantic; how much more does he want them to bend? He wants those who deceive us by calling themselves “sevak” actually want to become our masters!

Anil Bagarka
Mumbai

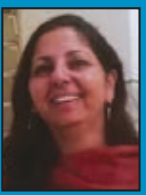
AYYAPPA CROWDS

THOUSANDS OF Ayyappa devotees are overcrowding Sabarimala in Kerala and must be managed innovatively before a tragedy takes place. It is highly appreciable that more police personnel were immediately put in for monitoring the crowds, but we suggest allotting different time slots online to devotees for visiting the main temple; installing big screens at multiple points to show the temple-puja program live; and also telecasting the puja live so that people may watch it on their TV sets at home.

Madhu P.V.
Secunderabad

Anita Katyal

Political Gup-Shup



BJP has Nitish on tight leash; in UP, it’s SIR over surname

The Janata Dal (United) in Bihar is naturally pleased as punch at having returned to power for yet another term. But there is also a degree of apprehension about how its relationship with the Bharatiya Janata Party will pan out once the government settles down to work. The BJP may have been forced to concede the chief minister’s post to Nitish Kumar but, JD(U) insiders maintain, their alliance partner is unlikely to give him an easy ride. Unlike the past, Nitish Kumar’s bargaining power has been considerably reduced this time round. He does not have the option of threatening to walk on the BJP because he no longer has the option of teaming up with his old partners, the Rashtriya Janata Dal and the Congress since they don’t have the numbers to prop up an alternate government. So even as celebrations were in full swing in the JD(U) camp, there were murmurs that the BJP has already made it clear that it will not play second fiddle in this dispensation. For instance, the BJP refused to give up its claim on the

post of Assembly speaker though Nitish Kumar was pushing his party’s case. Having given up on the Speaker’s post, the JD(U), it is said, wanted that only one deputy chief minister be appointed, but again, this proposal was vetoed by the BJP.

Krishna Allavaru, Congress Bihar-in-charge and a Rahul Gandhi camp follower, found himself in the eye of a storm when dismal poll figures for the party trickled in on counting day. Dramatic developments were witnessed at a Patna five-star hotel where Mr Allavaru was staying as angry local party workers started gathering in the lobby, waiting to confront the senior Congress leader. Mr Allavaru had already made himself unpopular with the party’s state unit for the selection of candidates and for his inaccessibility. When told that the workers were waiting to meet him, Mr Allavaru packed up in minutes and slipped out for Delhi in order to avoid what promised to be an ugly showdown. His team was issued strict instructions not to reveal the

travel details of all Congress leaders from Delhi who had been camping in Patna for the duration of the election. As rumour went round that senior leaders would meet them, even more workers arrived at the hotel. When the wait proved futile, many workers ordered food and billed it to Mr Allavaru’s room which was still booked in his name.

The acquisition of a vanity van by the ailing Rashtriya Janata Dal leader Lalu Prasad Yadav was a subject of avid discussion for several months in Bihar. Equipped with a sound system, a television set, a microwave and a toilet, the eight-seater was used by the senior RJD leader during the recent election campaign and for his earlier roadshows. According to his family members, the custom-made vanity van was required as Lalu Prasad Yadav cannot sit for long hours and needs to prop up his feet because of his kidney ailment. The van also came in handy when the former chief minister wanted to have private discussions with party leaders, providing a good get-

away from the rush of party workers at home. Then again, it has been put to good use to take the family members, especially the grandchildren, for a drive to Patna’s famous Marine Drive along the Ganga river. The buzz in Patna these days is that the van will now prove to be a sanctuary and an escape for Lalu Prasad Yadav from the ongoing battle among his children.

There was a time when leaders from across the political divide were not afraid to exchange pleasantries on social occasions like weddings and birthdays. But that’s no longer the case. The personal animosity between the Gandhi family and Prime Minister Narendra Modi has percolated down to state leaders and workers in both the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party. A recent incident in Uttarakhand shows how the message has been imbibed by them. Chief minister Pushkar Singh Dhami was to attend a social function in the hill state last week where former CM Harish Rawat was also an invitee. The tim-

ings of the two leaders were worked out in advance to ensure their paths did not cross. But as it happened, Mr Rawat reached late and stayed on for a longer period than was expected. Mr Dhami was informed midway to the venue that Mr Rawat had not left yet, forcing the chief minister to delay his arrival.

The ongoing Special Intensive Revision of the electoral rolls, popularly referred to as SIR, is topping discussions and debates across the country. But in Uttar Pradesh, political leaders from across the political spectrum said, it is not SIR that is grabbing attention but surname. Apparently, virtually everyone who goes to a government office for work is first asked to provide his or her surname. And if you belong to the favoured caste — in this case, Thakur — your file is given top priority. UP chief minister Yogi Adityanath is a Thakur and is known to favour those who belong to his caste.

Anita Katyal is a Delhi-based journalist

The indoor shield



GAGANDEEP ARORA

YOU shut the door on the hazy grey sky. You sealed the windows tight. You did everything right to escape the city's toxic air. But what if the real threat never left? Invisible and odourless, a swirl of fine particles, allergens and chemical vapours might already be hanging in the air around you and quietly turning your living room into a health hazard.

This isn't paranoia, it is the new reality. The air quality across the Delhi-NCR region has spiralled dangerously, with AQI readings frequently shooting into the "severe" zone. Recent CPCB data shows hotspots like Ghaziabad, Noida and several pockets of Delhi routinely breaching 350+. Across the border, Haryana's Jind and Rohtak are battling some of the worst numbers, while Punjab's Ludhiana and Mandi Gobindgarh are also seeing alarming dips in air quality.

As AQI soars and smog creeps indoors, air purifiers are emerging as must-have health guardians



As this blanket of smog deepens across the region, the grim truth is hard to ignore. Air pollution is no longer an outside threat you can shut the door on. It has slipped quietly indoors and turned our homes into unexpected health hazards. Even as the authorities scramble for solutions and the Supreme Court issues sharp rebukes to governments over their failure to bring the AQI levels down, the crisis shows no signs of easing. It is clear this isn't a nuisance that will disappear in a whiff. It will require sustained and coordinated action, not just quick fixes and seasonal outrage.

While we collectively fight for policy changes outdoors, we can take immediate and decisive control over the air inside our homes. The latest generation of air purifiers offers a vital shield against the invisible enemy.

HOW AN AIR PURIFIER WORKS

Air purifiers are your frontline defence, which work through a combination of filtration technologies.

HEPA FILTERS: The core of any good purifier are the high-efficiency particulate air filters, which trap 99.97 per cent of airborne particles as small as 0.3 microns, effectively capturing PM2.5, dust, pollen and allergens

ACTIVATED CARBON FILTERS: These work to neutralise gaseous pollutants. These absorb or chemically bond odours, smoke and harmful volatile organic compounds that mechanical filters miss.

PRE-FILTERS: These are the first line of defence, trapping large dust particles and pet hair, thereby extending the life of the HEPA filter.

When looking at a device, pay attention to the CADR (clean air delivery rate), which measures how effectively and quickly a purifier can clean the air in a specific room size. The higher the CADR, the larger the area it can cover.

THE VARIOUS OPTIONS

While the market is flooded with options, the latest models focus on higher CADR ratings, better app connectivity and lower running costs.

Let's explore some advanced gadgets that promise to make your indoor air breathable again, complete with models and prices (approximate) to guide your purchase.

HONEYWELL AIR TOUCH V3 (₹9,299): 5-stage filter system | 465 sq ft coverage | Removes 99.99% pollutants & allergens | CADR up to 300 m³/h | Noise level 30 decibels | 65 watts
WINIX 5500-2 (₹14,999): Captures 99.97% of airborne pollutants | 360 sq ft coverage | Noise level 27.8-40 decibels (dB) | CADR 300 m³/h | 70 watts

COWAY AIRMEGA 150 (₹17,999): Long filter life 8,500 hrs (1.5-2 years) | 355 sq ft coverage | Noise level 22-49 dB | CADR 300 m³/h | Patented carbon filter for removing bad odour
XIAOMI SMART AIR PURIFIER 4 (₹19,999): Excellent price-to-performance ratio | 516 sq ft coverage | Noise 32.1 dB | CADR 400 m³/h | Triple layer filtration and 360° air intake

DYSON COOL ME UP (₹39,899): Air multiplier tech delivers over 290 litres airflow per second | Monitors air quality and automatically adjusting airflow | Noise level 38-60 dB | CADR 300 m³/h | 101 sq ft coverage

DYSON HOT+COOL GEN1-HP10 (₹56,899): 3-in-1 heater, fan and purifier | Removes 99.95% of allergens and pollutants as small as PM 0.1 | Noise level 40-63 dB | 291 sq ft coverage | High airflow of 290 litres/s

Air purifier sales have spiked over 50 per cent recently. The total market is estimated to touch ₹578 crore in 2025. When selecting a model, remember to check the filter replacement costs (mostly hidden). Prioritise a high CADR for the room size you intend to cover and look for smart features that allow you to monitor air quality in real time.

TAKE CONTROL OF YOUR BREATH

The statistics about air pollution can certainly feel overwhelming, but investing in a high-quality air purifier is an empowering action. It is an investment not just in a gadget, but in the long-term health of your family.

Don't wait for the next wave of smog to choose your defence. Take a deep breath, review your options and secure your indoor shield today.

Anuradha Roy's new book captures 25 years of setting up home in the Himalayas

LOVE LETTER TO THE HILLS

MANDIRA NAYAR

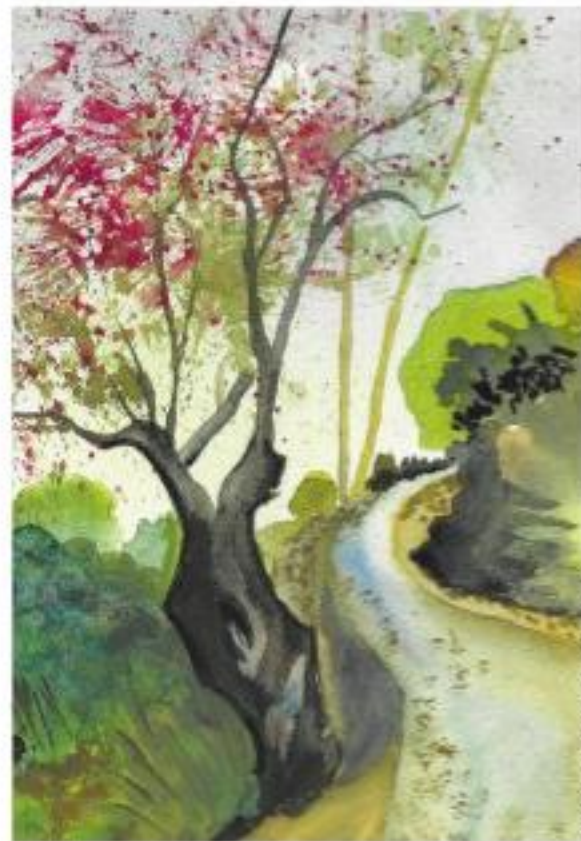
ANURADHA SHAHID ALI held the "half-inch Himalayas" in his hand. His home shrunk in his neat postcard in 'The Country Without a Postcard'. Anuradha Roy has crammed hers into a 171-page love letter to the mountains. Her new book, 'Called by the Hills: A Home in the Himalaya', is lyrical, evocative, quiet, joy-filled and so vivid that it carries with it a whiff of pine-scented air in polluted Delhi.

Twenty-five years ago, Anuradha and her husband Rukun — R, as he appears in the book — moved to the Himalayas beyond Ranikhet, where the "air turns to champagne". In a world where hustle is the mantra for existence, they chose what is anathema today: stillness, solitude, and a screen-free world. The book is a chronicle of this life.

She writes of mountains not as a fairyland, but the reality of it — where time moves slowly; of starting over, as a cash-strapped publishing house; a threadbare house built over a lifetime; living at the edge of a forest watching seasons unfold. Her home, neighbourhood, neighbours, town, garden, all come alive. There is Sadar Bazaar, with Raju's shop that had dial-up Internet — a lifeline when they moved as Internet then was the stuff of fantasy.

There are people who inhabit her world — Amit, a "frail, gentle alcoholic" who lived nearby, his face "ravaged by rum and grief". He became her chief ally on growing things. He had moved with his wife Anjali to the hills when she had been diagnosed with cancer. She "lived eighteen years, more than enough for them to build a garden together". Much of Anuradha's garden is borrowed from his bit of green. There's 'The Ancient', her housekeeper who came with the house — a package deal — disapproving of her not being the true *meharaj* and her efforts at trying to garden. True *meharaj*s didn't get their hands dirty. And Pandeji-kibibi, the *chowkidar*'s wife.

A lot of the book is mulch focused. Gardening is something Anuradha tries her hand at — inherited from her geologist father who loved growing plants. Her essays take the reader through her journey of making the Himalayas home and sowing and turning the garden in her head into reality. "I wanted fruit trees, creepers that would climb the trunks of those trees, particular flowers, even vegetables," she writes in 'The Earthly Look', a chapter that is an ode to fertilisers.



SKETCH BY THE AUTHOR



CALL BY THE HILLS: A HOME IN THE HIMALAYA
by Anuradha Roy.
John Murray/Hachette India
Pages 171 ₹999

It is hard to make fertiliser a vehicle for philosophy. But she does. Whether it was "so malodorous it was hard to imagine anything perfumed emerging from it", or her manure experiments with rotted cow dung the colour of dark chocolate, "glistening pink worms" to feed the soil "dark as coffee grounds" — Anuradha makes this essential ingredient into a lesson of wonder and creativity.

The most intensive tending of the garden happens as it settles into winter hibernation, she writes. It's the time to spread manure and sprinkle seeds that you forget until summer. In January, the cold rain soaks the manure and then the snow "covers it".

"By the time the sun moves again, the earth will be ready to give rather than take," she writes. The chapter chronicles her experiments with soil and gardens, but it could be a metaphor for inspiration. The lime tree took two decades to flower. Things take time is the theme of the book — and waiting, for spring, for flowers, for words.

Beautifully produced, the words will linger, as will the paintings. The pages are edged with red. Unlike other writers, Anuradha has remained resolutely old school — very few interviews and practically a ghost on social media. This book, however, is a window to her world. "My working life in writing seems somewhat absurd in a town where few people read, and fewer still read in English," she writes.

Part notebook, it has her observations, paintings and sketches. (She is also a potter and plays the flute). Fellow writers make an appearance. Bill Aitken, who ran away from Scotland mesmerised by Nanda Devi; Chandi Prasad Bhatt, the activist and writer who knows the Kumaon; Durga C Kala, who lived in a cottage smaller than theirs and spent decades working on the biography of Jim Corbett.

Or writers whose words and books line her shelves. Leela Majumdar's memoirs. Her dogs Baruni Junction, Biscuit and Jerry, her "magic" dog that appeared in fiction in 'The Earthspinner' as Chinnu, a pint-sized silky black excitedly running through the books. The *langurs* on her roof find themselves as part of the pages, as do the berries that she tries to turn into jam.

The book is a chronicle of a life changed, but it also bears witness to the destruction. The mountains are magical, but they're also wounded, and in her last essay, she writes of rain, temperatures of 40 in the Himalayas and turning them into an urban mess. As Anuradha opens up about her life, it forces you to confront life, the meaning of it, chasing speed and contentment.

For city-dwellers, this is a book that has lessons about patience. As much as it is about playing the flute for birds — and writing about it, the stuff that passes you by in cities choked with smoke.

In a speed-obsessed world, Anuradha finds stillness and writes about finding joy in the ordinary and staying rooted to the spot.

"Planting flowers? It will be years before you see anything," a 'sturdy' woman with goats told her as she stood in her rubbish-clogged earth when they moved in. "Everything happens in its own time. Flowers bloom in their own time. And half of them will die."

This piece of advice — unsolicited — is the lesson that you carry in your head and heart. 'Called by the Hills' is about wilderness, of being wild, the impermanence of life and healing. Of the power of nature and of a four-letter word — slow.

—The writer is a literary critic

CAPTION CONTEST 1537



PAWAN SHARMA

Entries are invited to suggest a caption for the photograph. The caption should only be in English, witty and not exceeding 10 words, and reach Spectrum, The Tribune, Chandigarh, 160030, by Thursday. The best five captions will be published and awarded ₹300, ₹250, ₹200, ₹150 and ₹100, respectively. Each caption must be accompanied by a clipping of the caption contest and its number. Photocopies or scans of the caption photo won't be accepted.

Online subscribers may attach an epaper clipping at captionpics@tribunemail.com or a scanned copy of the epaper clipping. Please mention the pin code and phone number, along with your address.

SELECTED ENTRIES FOR CAPTION CONTEST 1536



SPECTRUM NOVEMBER 16 ISSUE (SEE PHOTO)

Pot cast — Pawan Kumar, Chandigarh
Spinning shape-shifting stories — Tejwinder Singh Anand via epaper, Gurugram
Artistic potential — Pariyat Kapuria via epaper, Pathankot
Mould and beautiful — Rajiv Arora via epaper, Mumbai
Product of revolutions — Kamal Singh, Kharar

Rasam to warm you up

RAHUL VERMA

OUR neighbour Uma and her family are like a ray of sunshine on a bleak winter day. They come bearing containers of food every now and then, and feed our hearts and gladden our souls. And when winter comes knocking at our doors, she sends us hot *rasam*. I am immensely fond of this spicy, soup-like dish, especially her mutton *rasam*. It warms me up and whets my appetite.

Soups are good for all seasons. Cold soups — think of *gazpacho* or chilled cucumber soup — work well when the temperature shoots up. But when it dips, there is nothing quite like a bowl of hot soup. When our helpful neighbours are out of town or otherwise busy, we order *rasam* and *papadams* from South Indian eateries. What we don't get very easily are the non-vegetarian variations of *rasam* — such as hot broths cooked with chicken, mutton, or crab meat.

Another great winter warmer is the hot-and-sour soup. Our local Chinese restaurants know that during this season, when we place an order, hot-and-sour soup is the first item on our list. We love it for all the chunky ingredients that go into the thick soup — from vegetables and meats to seafood and tofu. Soy sauce, chilli sauce, vinegar, and black pepper enhance the hot flavours. The Thai *tom yum gai* (hot-and-sour chicken soup) is another great winter

UMA'S RASAM

INGREDIENTS

FOR THE SPICE POWDER

Black peppercorns	½ tsp
Cumin seeds	½ tsp
Coriander seeds	½ tsp
Fennel seeds	½ tsp
Red chillies (dried)	2-3

FOR THE RASAM

Gingelly (sesame) oil	2 tsp
Garlic cloves (finely chopped)	7
Onions/shallots (small, chopped)	12
Curry leaves	2 sprigs
Tomato (ripe)	1
Salt	½ tsp
Water	4 cups
Coriander leaves	A handful

MUTTON RASAM

For mutton stock	
Mutton bones (can include ribs)	250 gm
Water	4 cups
Peppercorns	A few
Turmeric powder	½ tsp
Curry leaves	1 sprig
Salt	To taste

METHOD

For the rasam

■ Dry roast all the spice ingredients on low flame for 3-4 minutes. Set aside to cool. Thereafter, grind to a fine powder.

■ Heat oil and add chopped garlic, small onions, and curry leaves. Sauté till the onions are soft. Add tomato and salt, and cook till soft. Add spice powder and sauté for a few seconds. Now add water and simmer for a few minutes. Garnish with coriander leaves. The rasam is ready.

For mutton rasam

■ Boil mutton bones with turmeric, salt, a few peppercorns, and curry leaves for 30 minutes in a pressure cooker.

■ Follow the steps given above for the rasam but do not add water, or coriander leaves. Instead, add the cooked mutton with the water that it has been boiled in. Let it simmer for a few minutes. Add in the coriander leaves. Serve hot.



ISTOCK

dish. In this, the heat comes from Bird's Eye chillies, which are an essential element of Southeast Asian cuisine.

Our Oriental cuisines know the importance of spicy soups. Soups, along with other dishes, are always served with an array of hot sauces. I enjoy adding the red hot chilli sauce

and the thin sauce of green chillies in vinegar to my soups. Noodle soups such as *thukpas* — a heap of noodles in a bowl of light broth, peppered with vegetables and meats — can be tempered with dollops of sauces. Thanks to these super-hot add-ons, I hardly ever need to consult my ENT specialist —

the spicy condiments open up my sinuses without a problem!

Black pepper and hot soups go well together. That is how the popular *muligatawny* soup took shape and a name. It's a portmanteau of the Tamil words *mulagu* (pepper) and *thannir* (water). This so-called pepper water is cooked with various kinds of meats, too.

A recipe I discovered for a spicy tomato soup keeps me warm just by thinking about it. The tomato soup is cooked with bell peppers, fire-roasted diced tomatoes, jalapenos, tequila and lime, and topped with smoky paprika. A very spicy soup is a stew prepared with Goan pork sausages, which are heavily spiced and cured with vinegar, red chillies and garlic. "These sausages are the soul of the dish. They give the stew its deep red colour and signature aroma," says chef Gabriella of Gabriella's Goan Kitchen, a food outlet based in Delhi.

I think one of the most effective soups — or call it what you will — for the season is a thin broth of *masoor dal*. Boil just a fistful of dal in a pot of water. Once it's cooked — it should be almost mushy — mix it well and let it simmer for a bit. Temper with red hot chillies, and then add small pieces of green chillies to the thin dal. Squeeze a slice of lemon over it, and then slurp it up. Potato fries, sprinkled with powdered black pepper, will enhance the experience.

The weather in North India is turning. And so am I — towards the kitchen.

—The writer is a food critic



PHOTO BY KARAM SINGH



PHOTO BY SONDEEP SHANKAR



PHOTO BY SONDEEP SHANKAR

PURE BLISS

IN a throwback to 1999, when Anandpur Sahib was painted pristine white to mark 300 years of the founding of Khalsa Panth, this year, too, the town founded by Guru Tegh Bahadur is set to mark the 350th martyrdom anniversary of its founder by donning a fresh coat of the colour of peace. Philanthropists have donated over 20,000 litres of white paint, and residents have stepped forward to beautify the pilgrimage centre for this week's commemorations. Back then, journalists and photographers from across the globe had converged upon Anandpur Sahib to cover the celebrations marking the birth of one of the world's youngest religions. Here, eminent lensman **Sondeep Shankar** shares images he clicked in November 1998 in the run-up to the Khalsa tercentenary celebrations. Alongside are photographs by **Karam Singh** of *The Tribune*, clicked in April 1999.

When space itself becomes the canvas

SHIREEN QUADRI

As Latitude 28 turns 15, it gets a new address and a show to celebrate

DESIGNED for "permeability between artist and audience", Latitude 28's new space at New Delhi's Defence Colony opened with *'Dramaturgies of Space'*, a show where eight artists are probing material, memory and landscape through a shared spatial grammar.

The new address celebrates 15 years of the gallery. Its director Bhavna Kakar describes it as "a reaffirmation of everything Latitude 28 has stood for... accessibility, dialogue, and a deeper engagement with contemporary South Asian art". The neighbourhood, at the heart of Delhi's gallery circuit, offers "an environment where audiences can move fluidly between cultural spaces and engage more closely with art and ideas".

Designed by architect Tushant Bansal, the new space embodies what Kakar calls "a sense of permeability between artist and audience, practice and theory, the visual and the discursive". This porousness is the foundation of the gallery's inaugural exhibition curated by Satyajit Dave. The exhibition, says Dave, arises from Kakar's insistence that the opening show must speak to the architecture. The gallery was not to be a neutral container, but "a site of dramaturgy".

The show brings together eight artists whose practices reimagine material, memory, and landscape in sharply different ways. From Assam, Chandan Bez Baruah turns digital photographs into woodcut prints, transforming a traditional craft into atmos-



pheric forestscapes. Firi Rahman responds to the anthropocene through symbolic animal forms and community-rooted archives, extending cartography into questions of inheritance. Juhikadevi Bhanjdeo uses the metaphor of the pocket to explore memory and protection, her indigo-rich textile abstractions carrying trauma, repair, and fortitude.

Monali Meher works with organic materials to trace cycles of time and transformation. While Riyas Komu interrogates displacement, democracy and collective memory through painting, sculpture and installation, Salik Ansari examines power and disappearance via cutout paintings and sculptural allegories. Sudipta Das shapes paper into miniature migrating figures,

evoking the precarity of lives in transit. Meanwhile, Waswo X Waswo's hand-tinted, collaboratively painted portraits gently subvert the colonial image archive.

"What drove the selection of these artists was how they use space as a conceptual method. All these artists understand spatial methodology to engage with viewers," says Dave. In other words, the show is less about a shared subject than a shared grammar; away of thinking through space, not just within it.

This grammar resonates with Dave's own background across design, craft, pedagogy and indigenous knowledge systems. He rejects the idea that these are separate domains: "I don't find these worlds to be so different. One learns and imagines through these different worlds." He offers a vivid



example: "The spatial play of a *kavadd* (portable wooden shrine) becomes a tool for exhibition design as well as a tool to set the tempo of a classroom conversation." Blurring boundaries is not a strategy but a habit that, he hopes, visitors will absorb.

Kakar sees the new space as a platform for precisely this expanded form of thinking and making. While the gallery has long championed experimentation — particularly from South Asia — its previous location (Vasant Vihar) did not always allow for the scale and spontaneity she envisioned. The new space, she hopes, will become a place "not just about showing work, but about enabling dialogues that bring artists, writers, researchers, and audiences together".

— Quadri writes on art and culture

'Spaces and Memories XXIV' by Firi Rahman. Ink, Acrylic on Paper, Wood, 2025; (above, left) *'Modified Hearts'* series by Monali Meher. Handmade Paper, Wool, Black Japan Ink, 2008.

'Threads of Belonging' by Sudipta Das. Mixed Media, 2025.

BOOKS

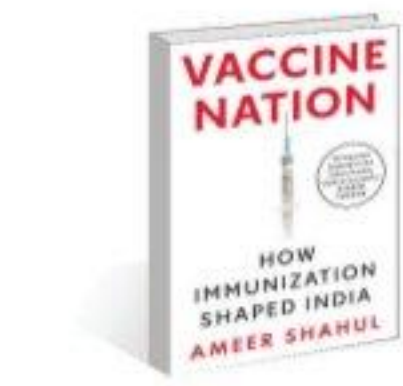
Science and India's vaccine story

SAMIR MALHOTRA

IN 'Vaccine Nation: How Immunization Shaped India', Ameer Shahul traces the historical, political and ethical trajectory of vaccination in India from colonial times. He chronicles the development of vaccines, celebrating them as milestones in human ingenuity, while simultaneously providing a social and political context of how immunisation came to symbolise the making of modern India. Although the title includes India, Shahul captures the landmark historical moments that shaped vaccine discovery and deployment, irrespective of their country of discovery.

Drawing on vivid anecdotes, from scientists testing vaccines on themselves, their children, prisoners, or soldiers (practices that would be ethically unthinkable today), to the mass vaccination campaigns of the 19th and 20th centuries, the book elegantly captures how modern immunisation practices evolved and led us to where we are today.

Shahul takes us from Haffkine and Jenner's pioneering works to the controversies surrounding polio eradication and Covid-19, traversing empires and democracies along the way. His writing is lucid and empathetic, particularly when portraying the stories of public health and mutual aid. Yet he does not shy away from critique, highlighting, for instance, the questionable practices of multinational corporations and the growing sway of market forces in what was once considered a purely humanitarian enterprise. "Could you patent the sun?" Jonas Salk



VACCINE NATION: HOW IMMUNIZATION SHAPED INDIA
by Ameer Shahul
Pan Macmillan.
Pages 478. ₹699

famously asked when pressed to patent the polio vaccine. His collaborator Albert Sabin called his own discovery a "gift to children".

The author's treatment of the smallpox eradication campaign is nuanced, balancing colonial legacies with post-Independence scientific achievements. Equally compelling is the story of Varaprasad Reddy, who transformed from political rebel to "vaccine rebel" through his fight for the hepatitis B vaccine. Also fascinating is the portrait of Sahib Singh Sokhey, whose vision of the public sector's role in healthcare and institution building remains instructive even today.

The transformation of a Pune stud farm into the world's largest vaccine producer, the Serum Institute of India, is one of the book's most interesting accounts. It shows how vision and public health goals can align to shape national capacity and global equity. It

is a remarkable story of how vaccines moved from labs and government institutes into large-scale industrial production, yet remaining, at their core, public goods. The analysis of the Universal Immunisation Programme is a sobering lesson in the challenges of implementing large-scale public health initiatives in a diverse, unequal nation.

Another strength lies in Shahul's exploration of how Indian research institutions took root and grew, before and after Independence, leading to the country's eventual self-sufficiency in vaccine production. It would be interesting to see a critical analysis of the current status of the 50 or so institutions described in the book, examining how they have evolved, or struggled, amid globalisation and privatisation.

While deeply engaging, the book is not without shortcomings. For a work that rightfully champions India's self-reliance in vaccine development, its treatment of the Indian Patents Act, 1970, is surprisingly brief. This landmark legislation, recognising process rather than product patents, formed the cornerstone of India's pharmaceutical independence. A more detailed account of its conception, the political battle behind it, the roles of various committees—like that of Dr Bakshi Tek Chand (a retired judge of the Lahore High Court) Committee (1950) and later Justice N Rajagopala Ayyangar Committee—and how much time it took to pass the legislation, would have greatly enriched the book's economic and policy dimensions.

The second point is about the book's likely audience—it occupies an awkward mid-

die ground. The narrative, while accessible to a determined layperson, might not keep them involved for long. Conversely, experts and historians will find much of it familiar, as the book synthesises well-known histories. Its unique contribution lies in weaving these threads together, but experts might crave for more "revelations" or a more provocative thesis, which, admittedly, is not an easy thing when it comes to this topic.

A few factual and stylistic lapses detract from an otherwise commendable work. The description of Waldemar Haffkine as "Soviet-born" is historically inaccurate; he was born in Odessa in 1860, six decades before the USSR came into being. The footnotes, while informative, at times are over-explanatory. These are small irritants, and do not detract substantially from the book's value.

'Vaccine Nation' is a significant and timely contribution. It may not be the definitive word on the subject, but it is certainly an important one. In the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, Shahul's account offers a valuable backstory for understanding why our system reacted the way it did, the legacy of our vaccine diplomacy, the fragility of health infrastructures worldwide and the persistent challenge of vaccine hesitancy.

For readers interested in the moral, historical and political underpinnings of vaccination, this book offers insight and perspective as it fittingly concludes: "In a world driven by patents and fractured by technological inequality, the right to life must remain sacrosanct."

—The reviewer is a professor at PGI

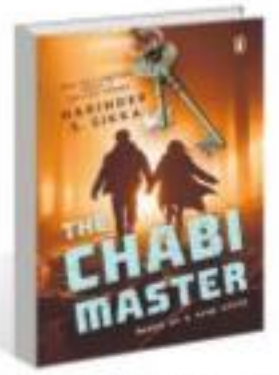


BACKFLAP



TEACHINGS ON LOVE
by Thich Nhat Hanh.
Aleph.
Pages 165. ₹399

Spiritual leader Thich Nhat Hanh passed away in 2022, leaving behind a treasure trove of lessons. Blending traditional stories, personal reflections, and a deep comprehension of mindful living, this book provides step-by-step practices that foster understanding and intimacy in any relationship and extend love even to those that cause us pain. It guides on strengthening bonds and navigating the difficulties that test people. It speaks to our universal longing for love.



THE CHABIMASTER
by Harinder S Sikka.
Penguin Random House.
Pages 256. ₹350

Pieced together from real-life events and untold stories from classified files, 'The Chabimaster' is the author's tribute to those unknown faces who ensure the safety of every individual of this country. When the brilliant strategist Ravi, joint director of RAW, realises that cross-border skirmishes are just a method of keeping the nation engaged, he begins to trace and track a series of seemingly unrelated events. What he uncovers sets him on the edge.



DEFENCE FORCES AND THE FREEDOM MOVEMENT: 1903-1947 AD
by Jagdish Chander Joshi.
Between Lines.
Pages 454. ₹999

This book brings the spotlight on the decisive role that the defence forces played in winning freedom for the country. Taking the period between 1903 and 1947 into account, it delves into how Ghadar Party's attempts to tamper with the British Indian army and "sedition" during the two World Wars gave anxious moments to the imperialist forces. Even as the Khilafat and Non-Cooperation movements were leaving their mark, those in the defence forces were playing their part.

Sea-saw that is Mumbai

MEGHNA PANT

THE city always begins with the sea. And in 'The Only City', Anindita Ghose's new anthology on Mumbai, the sea keeps returning—not just as geography, but as memory, metaphor and minor. It glimmers between paragraphs, drifts through train compartments, sloshes inside half-empty glasses of Old Monk. It carries lovers, struggles, nurses, ghosts. It carries us.

Raghu Karnad's story sets the tone—slow, sun-dappled, and full of sea spray. A rich man and a poor girl share a speedboat from Alibag to Mumbai. Around them, rogue *chikoks* roll, arms flail, and something tender almost happens. It's a story that never hurries. You want it to move faster, but perhaps that's the point—Mumbai, too, makes you wait for what it never promises.

Amrita Mahale's 'Aai Tai' is an easier tide to ride—a sweet, slightly surreal tale of a 19-year-old struggler obsessed with a four-armed baby. It's playful, intimate, the kind of story you read on a local train, smiling faintly at the absurdity of hope. Mahale understands the girl-dreamers of Mumbai—their rented rooms, their half-written poems, their fierce hunger to be seen.

Ghose's own story is among the finest here—polished, perceptive, quietly piercing. It explores the fragile negotiations of marriage and modern love, without melodrama. There's no neat closure, only the ache of endurance. Her prose elegant but never ornamental, her insight sharp but never cruel.

Prathyush Parasuraman's 'Two Bi Two' is another standout—set in the second-last compartment of a Mumbai local, the one known to "pick up" queers and middle-class dreamers alike. A man resists a fleeting encounter with a stranger. The story hums

with restraint and empathy—a meditation on desire denied, and dignity retained.

Shanta Gokhale's old-school playfulness provides a breath of light. Her prose is effortless, sly, alive—the kind that reminds you literature need not shout to be heard.

Nurse Shanti' by Tejaswini Apte-Rahm, too, stands tall—a tale of an old man, a nurse, and a mysterious package that unfolds into loss and memory. It's eerie yet tender, domestic and devastating at once.

Lindsay Pereira's 'Stray' stops you mid-breath. His portrait of a homeless man watching the city lose its soul piece by piece offers the collection's most haunting line: "It felt as if the people of Bombay had lost something as well... where he had once found beauty in its wood and stone, there was only plastic and naked metal."

Dharini Bhaskar's 'Silver Cloud' offers another memorable image: "Mine was a Bombay without a sea." What a quiet heartbreak—a city stripped of its pulse, its promise, its blue horizon. That's the Bombay many of us now inhabit: one where rent rises, kindness shrinks, and the sea belongs to someone else's balcony.

Kersi Khambatta's 'The Hon. Secy' crackles with wicked Parsi humour, a reminder that satire is born of intimacy, not distance. Manu Joseph's story about magic and schizophrenia is sly and subversive, evidence of why he remains my favourite contemporary writer. Jeet Thayil's dystopic Mumbai closes the collection with a dark brilliant shimmer.

I'm glad 'The Only City' exists. It's proof that the short story still endures. It is, after all, like a window in a high-rise; you can't live there, but you can glimpse the world through it. For a moment, it holds you. For a moment, it's enough.

Like all love letters to Mumbai, the anthology is tender, chaotic, and irresistibly sincere. A reminder that Mumbai is not a city you arrive in or leave. It's a story you keep rewriting—uneven, unending, entirely your own.

—The reviewer is an award-winning author



THE ONLY CITY: BOMBAY IN EIGHTEEN STORIES
by Anindita Ghose.
HarperCollins.
Pages 352.
₹699

Educative take on pandemic

JYOTI DALAL

FOR Heidegger, to think is to attend, and it is this thoughtful, patient attention that the Covid-19 pandemic has never been bestowed with. While going through it, we were not supposed to attend to it, as the call for a return to the earlier apparent normalcy was overwhelming. It meant resorting to hasty actions, thus foreclosing the meaningful discussions that should have otherwise been generated around it.

The pandemic has been marked with a strange mutism and amnesia. As a community, we are supposed to forget about it like one bad nightmare. The pandemic has been written and re-written by the popular and policy discourses, hailing our triumph over the virus. This important book, edited by Satvinderpal Kaur and Pradeep Kumar Choudhury, brings a tear in this smooth version, pushing us to attend to those rifts that we were being told not to see and listen to those voices that we have long drowned.

The carefully curated chapters have diffused Covid-19 from the conventional temporal understanding that contains it within a calendar time. By demonstrating its lingering nature, the book underlines its detrimental effect, as it not only widened the fault lines that already existed, but how it would continue to be present for the times to come.

Neatly divided into three parts, with three chapters in each section, the book covers the landscape of the deep-seated impact of the pandemic on education, by locating it in the larger political-economic context of our country. Through rich fieldwork, the book demonstrates the ramifications of the social nature of this virus, as the marginalised stood further abandoned. Instead of bridging the gaps, education, by overtly relying on digital circuits of learning, has further intensified their social, political and economic abandonment.

While the book attends to mechanisms that illustrate how education has been deeply



COVID-19 AND EDUCATION IN INDIA
Edited by Satvinderpal Kaur,
Pradeep Kumar Choudhury.
Routledge.
Pages 216. ₹1,295

impacted by the pandemic, it doesn't restrict itself within it. It pushes these conventional tropes by further highlighting how education has been systematically used to attain political ends of the state, as new ways of governance have emerged with the pandemic.

The age-old strong state-market connect is now going through algorithmic governance that marks late capitalism. The complex role that education plays in making these coordinated linkages of state with corporate capitalism is well evinced in the book. How this increasingly strong foothold of edtech has altered the nature of knowledge while giving space to the principles that are central to late capitalism is also unraveled.

Philosophers have argued how our memory, subjectivity and attention have been short-circuited and transfer of knowledge from one generation to the next, a process central to education, has been disrupted. Instead of turning away from the questions of technology, it is pertinent to look at it as a pharmakon that cannot just be rendered away as detrimental, but has a curative potential as well.

What can be the contours of this education are some questions that the authors of this book can further delve into, as we collectively need to attend to the times that we are in.

—The reviewer teaches at Institute of Home Economics, Delhi University

An expansive canvas of life and teachings of Guru Tegh Bahadur

ROOPINDER SINGH

PROF HARBANS SINGH has a special status among Sikh scholars. The four-volume 'Encyclopaedia of Sikhism', his magnum opus, has become the go-to reference book for people seeking a definitive work on multiple aspects of the Sikh ethos, religion and people. In time, there have been other encyclopaedias, including the 'Briti Encyclopaedia of Sikhism', yet the original is the one kept handy on most bookshelves, including that of this writer.

Prof Harbans Singh (1921-1998) was among the teachers who bridged traditional Punjabi scholarship and English academia. Besides his landmark work in establishing and heading the Department of Comparative Religion at Punjabi University, Patiala, he also wrote books that are still referred to by researchers and regular readers alike.

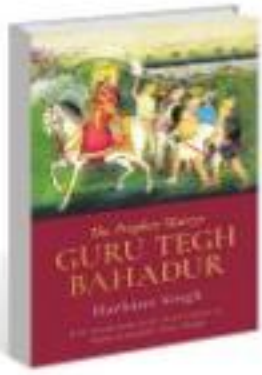
'The Prophet-Martyr: Guru Tegh Bahadur' is based on his original 'Guru Tegh Bahadur'. The 1982 Sterling Publica-

tions book has been revised and expanded with the inclusion of the *slokas* by Guru Tegh Bahadur, translated by his daughter, Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh.

The release of this volume is well-timed, as we commemorate the 350th anniversary of the martyrdom of the ninth Guru of the Sikhs, and many are seeking books that offer more about the Guru and his teachings. By building an expansive canvas that includes a background under titled 'The Inheritance', the writer gives an overview that allows us to place the Guru in the broader context, which is necessary to understand more about him.

Besides his deep understanding of Sikh religion and the various languages used in Guru Granth Sahib, his felicity with English stands out. He paints word pictures that evoke emotions even as they appeal to the intellect. Indeed, besides the book under review, his 'Heritage of the Sikhs' has been a perennial ever since it came out in 1964.

Modern authors glean history from traditional poetic texts such as 'Gurbilas Chhevi Patshahi' (1718), Koer Singh's 'Gurbilas



THE PROPHET-MARTYR: GURU TEGH BAHADUR
by Harbans Singh.
Speaking Tiger.
Pages 200. ₹499

Patshahi' 10 (1751), Rattan Singh Bhangu's 'Prachin Panth Parkash' (1841), among others. While writing a biography of the Guru, we find crucial references to him in other texts, documents like his 'Hukamnamas', and, of course, his *bani*, enshrined in Guru Granth Sahib. Relying on traditional sources and research from the personal collection of

the noted historian, the late Dr Ganda Singh, the author has given a compelling account of the life and times of Guru Tegh Bahadur.

The biographical details are fascinating, especially since the author weaves in contemporaneous events into the narrative, which helps the reader understand better. He was not interested in *gadli* and was glad to be of service to the successor Gurus of his father. But when he was anointed Guru, he was clear about his role and place among the Sikhs. He undertook long spiritual journeys beyond Punjab to spread the teachings of the Gurus and to consolidate the *sangats* that had existed since the time of Guru Nanak.

The Guru's *bani* "is not born of the rapture of cloudy mysticism, but of the very experience of Reality, of spiritual discipline of the highest order, of philosophic wisdom and enlightenment", asserts the author.

In the chapter 'Vision and Teachings', Prof Harbans Singh provides an overview of the *bani* of the Guru, and in the next chapter, he translates some *shabads* and *slokas* from Guru Granth Sahib.

Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh takes the baton hereafter, as she has in real life, continuing her father's legacy in serving Sikh scholarship. She has been with Colby College in Waterville, Maine, USA, since 1986 and is now the Crawford Family Professor of Religion and Chair of Religious Studies. With many books and academic laurels to her credit, she is a scholar in her own right, as well as her learned father's daughter.

We see this role in the latest *jugalbandi*, the revised edition of this book, where she contributes by expanding the book by writing the 'Prelude to the *Slokas* of Guru Tegh Bahadur' and translating these *slokas*. Reading them, one gets a feeling of continuity and freshness.

As we commemorate 350 years of the martyrdom of the Guru, we need to go beyond public displays of religious fervour. We must connect ourselves with the Guru's life and his teachings. 'The Prophet-Martyr: Guru Tegh Bahadur' is a way for the English-reading world to do so, lucidly.

—The reviewer is a journalist & author

REFLECTIONS

Keeping the house running



TOUCHSTONES
IRA PANDE

WITH Delhi and NCR's air declared the filthiest in the country, we decided to run away to Uttarakhand along with a band of friends. This time, we planned to explore a little-known hill station called Lansdowne, which is also the headquarters of the Garhwal Rifles. As a proud Kumaoni, I was prepared to pooh-poo the Garhwali part of Uttarakhand (an old feud between these two territories), but what we saw blew my prejudices away.

The resort we stayed in offered the most spectacular vista of the Garhwal Himalayas, called the Kedarnath range that straddles the horizon like a fortress of snow. From the first ray of the sun that tinges these awesome peaks pink to the colourful sunset that paints the entire sky orange, we were treated to sights that nourish the soul. This stunning range stands behind the Kedarnath temple and is part of the Gangotri group of peaks.

It is the western range of the Panchachuli range that is visible in Kumaon and the peaks that we proudly point out there — Trishul, Nanda Ghunti, Nanda Kot and Nanda Devi — look so remote and tiny beside this vista of Chaukhamba, Kedarnath, Badrinath and Gangotri. As for the sky, I know now what cerulean blue means. The area is also one of the few blue pine forests left in the country and the densely forested ranges around us were a feast of blue and green. Pretty terraced fields add to the picture-perfect villages that dot the area. Thanks now to solar power, the isolated houses there glow like fireflies in the stygian darkness that envelops our mountains after sunset.

Thankfully, the Army has kept the area inviolate so far but already there are momo-sellers and Maggi points all along the way to this hard-to-find hill station. I dread the onslaught of the intrepid Indian tourist who will surely come to pollute the mountains and leave empty packets of chips, plastic bottles and play loud music. Just as I was forced to confront the old Kumaon-Garhwal snobbery, I have to confess that the Indian Army runs its cantonment areas far better than our civilian governments.

If women decided public policy and conflict resolution, the world would be more just and peaceful

Within the Army headquarters area, there was not a trace of litter. Their spit and polish of the old colonial bungalows have kept them exactly as they were when first built 102 years ago. The furniture (Burma teak, no less), the parade ground and the mess (with a billiards room) have to be lauded. I was reminded of the equally beautiful properties that our civilian officers were bequeathed and rue what they have been reduced to.

The Parade Ground was full of Agniveer recruits being made to practise for their passing-out parade at the end of the month. For many of these fresh-faced youths, this was their first encounter with the rigour and discipline of a structured routine. Many may be absorbed by the Army and paramilitary organisations, others by security agencies, while some will get seed capital to start a venture. No wonder we saw young village boys running up and down the hills to prepare for a life in the 'paltan', always a popular outlet for hill people.

Several countries make army service com-

pulsory for all pre-college girls and boys so that they get a taste of the hard life they must face after they pass school. There are many who have issues with this form of indoctrination, yet given the alternate drifting life when many take to drugs, alcohol and crime in the absence of a purpose in life, I have altered my views on this scheme.

Now for a takeaway from the Bihar elections that most commentators have pronounced as a victory gifted by the women of Bihar to Nitish Kumar and the NDA. The most important fallout of this for me is that women voters will henceforth be taken very seriously by all our political parties and more space will have to be made for them in government budgets, jobs and political representation. As a woman, I rejoice at the recognition (however grudgingly made) of the power that women hold in dislodging the patriarchal system that has used its brute and brutish power to keep them invisible within homes and behind veils. Not just in Bihar and India, if the world were to move in the direction of giving women a chance to decide public policy and conflict resolution, you can take it from me the world would be a more just, equitable and peaceful place.

Giving women a role in forest management, ecological matters and care for the aged and infirm would tap into wisdom that Nature has blessed women with. Men are completely deficient in emotional intelligence (I often say this is a manufacturing defect), so keeping the house running smoothly with everyone cared for is always considered a woman's job. What else is running a country but a scaled-up version of running a home and family? Above all, women are less prone to corruption, though there are exceptions we cannot forget.

So hurrah for the women of Bihar, and for Nitish Kumar who has spent many decades pulling up the women of his state from the miserable plight they were doomed to live under the patriarchal system that never recognised their worth. One day, when I am long gone, my granddaughters will inherit a world that they will thank us for fighting for their liberation.

—The writer is a social commentator

Many moons ago, and occupation forces now



AVAY SHUKLA

THESE last few years have been disillusioning for people of my vintage, brought up to regard the moon — that "silver deity of secret night", as the poetess Lady Mary Montagu put it — as an object of mystery and romance cloaked in an impenetrable celestial halo. It has been the staple of Hindi films of my era: remember Mukesh's 'Ae meri jaan chand sa goru mukhra...', or that haunting duet of Raaj Kumar and Meena Kumari, 'Chalo didar chalo, chand ke paar chalo'?

Ours was also the moon that belonged to everyone, the Hindu wives at Karva Chauth and the Muslim brothers and sisters at Eid. No more, unfortunately, as more and more countries target it for profit, stripping it of all its mystery and wonder. It has now been appropriated by scientists, engineers, salivating capitalists, and politicians wishing to burnish their nationalist credentials.

I distinctly remember when this planetary disrobing began, 56 years back on a night in 1969. I was then in St Xavier's College hostel on Park Street, Calcutta. A few of us had gathered in the house of a friend, Karan Deva, on Camac Street, to listen to the live commentary of the first manned mission to the moon, and to Neil Armstrong's historic words — "A small step for man..." — which would have got him into a lot of trouble in today's woke world for being sexist and disregarding the other 16 genders.

The journey that began with that small step has more or less culminated, for me at least, with the landing of Chandrayaan and the Vikram Rover on the south pole of the moon on August 24, 2023. Some vestiges of the mystery still remained, however, as I watched the spacecraft hovering over its landing spot, but even that disappeared the moment Mr Modi made his inappropriate appearance on the TV screen.

Poets, songsters, lovers and dreamers will now have to go back home and seek some new source of inspiration, for the moon now belongs to the politicians, rabid nationalists and venture capitalists counting their dollars. Its days are numbered. In a few years, it will be carved out among whoever constitutes the G-20 or G-420 then. Its innards shall be mined and extracted to cater to the relentless greed of a species which by then would have fouled its own nest irretrievably and made it unliveable.

Those who destroyed our own planet will be the ones who will leave and build their condos on already identified spots like Alphonsus, Lunar Maria, Mare Tranquillitas, and, not to forget, our very own Jawahar Sthal and Shiv Shakti. And that Biblical prophecy — "The meek shall inherit the earth" — will finally come true, for the rich will abandon it and the meek shall have no other choice but to continue to languish here.

The revelations of Chandrayaan so far are a mixed bag. Bangaloreans have much cause to rejoice, for the Rover evidently has had to negotiate its way

through myriad craters, something which the residents of this city do twice every day: they will feel at home on the lunar surface. Our tipplers from Kerala and Punjab are also a relieved lot: Chandrayaan has reported that the moon has plenty of ice and water, so our Bacchanalians need to carry only Blender's Pride and Uncle Chippis on their interstellar journey. Our faithful wives should also be a happy lot: it appears that the moon's surface has no water of its own, all the water there consists of the millions of litres offered to the moon by devout wives for millennia at the Hindu festival of Karva Chauth. It's good to know that their water has not been wasted, but will now be recycled by their husbands in conjunction with the daughter of grapes.

The bad news, of course, is that the admiring Romeos and Lotharios will now have to find some other simile to describe the objects of their affection: the Rover has established that the moon's surface is not, as hitherto thought, as smooth as Meena Kumari's cheeks, but is more like Om Puri's virile, pock-marked kisser. As someone said, however, you win some, you lose some.

I watched the Super Moon with more than a tinge of sadness. I was sad, because some things should be beyond science and the avarice of man

And talking of winning, here's an idea for Niti Aayog (which appears to have run out of them for quite some time now): the government should hand over ISRO to our leading industrialist and the 23rd richest man on earth (give or take a few ranks). After all, this gentleman already controls all other modes of transport with his airports, sea ports, terminals and highways; we shall only be squaring the circle by giving him space travel also. And who better than him to exploit all that titanium, magnesium, silicon and aluminium so abundant on the moon, what with his experience of denuding our forests of these minerals?

The moon venture will be an off-shore venture, of course, and no one, it appears, is as adept at locating off-shore funding as the ultra rich. I suspect that he may even have an insider on the moon to help him out, probably a reemployed IAS officer — the Man on the Moon, who, as every child knows, has been there for thousands of years. We've all seen him on certain nights, and it's high time we used his insider knowledge to bolster our Vishwaguru status.

I watched the Super Moon in my village, Puranikoti, with my family, with more than a tinge of sadness. It was there above the tall, dark deodars, a massive white Bone China plate, a medallion on the ebony breast of the night sky, its benign glow bathing my world with the infinite beauty of nature. I was sad, because some things should be beyond science and the avarice of man. My moon continues to be one made of childhood memories and green cheese.

—The writer is a retired IAS officer

The two faces of Varuna

VARUNA is one of the most ancient gods of the Vedic pantheon. In the Rig Veda, he is majestic, distant, and terrifying. He sits above the world, ruler of the sky and the ocean, guardian of the cosmic law called *rita*. He sees everything. Nothing escapes him. His noose catches those who lie or break their word. His power is not physical strength but moral authority. He is a governor and a judge. He belongs to the world of priests, chants, and night skies. He complements Indra, the warrior. Indra is associated with raids and war. Varuna is associated with peace. Indra accumulates wealth (*yo*ga). Varuna distributes wealth (*kshema*). Indra is linked to individualistic expansion (*sva*rajya). Varuna is linked with collective consolidation (*sa*mrajya).

But in later texts, Varuna is linked to the sea and the western direction, just as Indra is more linked to rain and the eastern direction. When Vishnu and Shiva rise in popularity, Varuna becomes father of Lakshmi, the goddess of fortune, who Indra woos.

But, far away from the texts, along the long Indian coastline, a different Varuna lives. A romantic sea god — Samudra Dev, Jol Devta, Varun Raja. Here, people speak to him, sing to him, fear him, love him. Fishermen sing at dawn, traders pray at dusk, and sailors whisper to him before sailing. In these songs and stories, the tides of the sea represent the yearnings and craving of a lonely god.



In Gujarat, they tell of a fisherwoman who sings so sweetly that Varun Raja rises from the sea to woo her. But when she refuses, he does not punish her. He leaves her pearls and

The magic of Indian mythology is that gods are never frozen in one form. They change as they travel. They carry both dignity and desire

fish — gifts of the ocean. In Odisha, the sea god falls in love with a young bride who waits at the shore for her husband's return. He cannot have her; so he gives her safe passage and treasures instead. And in Bengal's Sundarbans, the sea god seduces a pearl maiden, takes her beneath the waves, but lets her go when she wants to return to the human world. This is not the cold Varuna of the Veda, but a warm, desiring, passionate god.

So we have two ways of seeing the same god. One is cosmic, where Varuna stands for law, morality, and distant power. The other is folk, where he is a sensual sea-god, who desires but also respects the shore. In the first, the sea is infinite and formless, like the night sky. In the second, it is alive, hungry, breathing, a lover who whispers through the waves.

Both images coexist. Neither cancels the other. The Vedic Varuna reflects the worldview of priests and rituals, where gods are guardians of order. The folk Varuna reflects the worldview of people who live with the sea every day — fisherfolk, traders, sailors — who must treat the ocean as a being with moods, appetites, and emotions.

And that is the magic of Indian mythology. Gods are never frozen in one form. They change as they travel. They carry both dignity and desire. Varuna is not only the god of the sea; he is the sea — sometimes calm, sometimes dangerous, sometimes a judge, sometimes a lover.

—The writer is an acclaimed mythologist

Mirpur refugees, Jammu's Bakshi Nagar, and bus stop drama



RAAJA BHASIN

MY mother's family were refugees from Mirpur. This is now in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. In Jammu, November 25 is still marked as 'Mirpur Balidan Divas'. On that day in 1947, and in the couple of days that followed, in the aftermath of Partition, one of the most heinous massacres took place. It is one that has rarely been talked or written about. India had been Independent for over three months when Mirpur was attacked by what are believed to be contingents of the regular army and by irregulars and mercenaries from Pakistan.

This attack was followed by what is believed to be a pogrom in which around 18,000 Hindus and Sikhs were massacred.

My mother's family escaped death (or worse), as they were in Jammu at the time. In a separate incident, my grandfather's older brother, Chaudhry Amar Nath, who was the *Wazir-e-Wizarat*, Governor of Skardu (Baltistan), Gilgit and Ladakh, had already been brutally killed and his wife, who escaped with their young children, wore a metal strap on a leg and a special shoe, as she too had been shot and badly wounded.

Most of the survivors from Mirpur were settled in what was to become Bakshi Nagar in Jammu. That is where my grandparents lived and where my parents, my sister and I spent a couple of months every winter. Over the years, one watched the house grow from a very basic structure to something rather grand.

It was a house that had a constant stream of visitors. Something was always coming out of the kitchen. Conversation was often hushed. When we children were around, the elders would often stop talking. Today, I know why those silences came. They did not want us to hear about all those times and their unanswered questions about who could still be alive and who got killed. And

yet, it was a house filled with laughter and great love. It was also a place where the easier and funnier sides of life could be observed.

A little below the house was a bus stop. A short slope, past a couple of *bertrees*, led to a trifurcation. One slope went up to the main section of Bakshi Nagar. A mild descent led down to the canal where, often enough, I would join my parents and uncles on their evening walk. That was only if the family dog, who went by the eponymous name of Doggie, chose that direction. That dog was a canine of many moods and of considerable character. At some point, he had moved into the house from an indeterminate place and with an equally indeterminate ancestry.

He would choose where we would go.

A house with a stream of visitors, but there was often a hush. Now I know why those silences came

Doggie ji, as he was respectfully known, in deference to his firmness and determination, would grab the lead walker's legs and cling on till his chosen route for the evening was approved. The trifurcation of the roads was where this world-changing decision would be made.

That trifurcation also had the bus stop. For reasons best known only to him, Doggie ji did not like the old three-wheel tempos. These stopped there to pick and drop passengers. There, at the bottom of the '*dhu*ki', as an incline was locally called, dramas would periodically unfold.

Some were verbal arguments that could occasionally turn into an exchange of fisticuffs and some were pure entertainment. Of the former, many stemmed from the tempos trying to catch as many 'fish', as passengers were called, and stuff them into their tempo-nets. Rattling away and spewing smoke, off they would race to disgorge one lot of cramped passengers that emerged in assorted yogic postures to harvest the next catch.

The way excessive fishing has reduced marine life in certain seas, similarly, argu-

ments stemmed from moments when one tempo had trawled the road and left no 'fish' for the next one. And when a bus came by, it was like the local industrial scale trawler that would dredge the area with a catch that could have been collected by several tempos. That was when all the tempo drivers would suddenly become convivial and polite to each other. They would line up neatly and wait for passengers. The big shark had swept away all fish and now that common enemy had made friends of all the rival littler fishing tempos.

As entertainment was limited, as a child, one hung around that bus stop — and occasionally took a bus to Raghunath Bazaar. Two incidents remain parked in memory. The first was of a lady who berated the driver as he refused to wait till 'Beeji finished her bath'. The second was the moment when another lady was short of money for the fare, and couldn't understand why the conductor couldn't put the rest from his own pocket. (For the readers who speak Dogri or Punjabi, please translate these lines to get the real effect of the conversations!)

—The writer is an author based in Shimla

Is there a way out of alcoholism? At an AA convention in Haridwar, recovering alcoholics show how

RAISING A TOAST TO LIFE

PRADEEP SHARMA

NESTLED in the foothills of the Shivaliks, the sprawling Premnagar Ashram on the banks of the Ganges in Haridwar played host to an unusual gathering in the mid-November balmy weather, ideal for an afternoon drink for many. Hundreds of members of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), a worldwide fellowship of over 20 lakh recovering alcoholics, raised a toast over a cup of coffee or tea instead — reaffirming their faith that a sober and normal life was possible without that 'Patiala peg' which virtually destroyed their lives once.

With gratitude in the heart and a prayer on the lips, enthusiastic recovering alcoholics shared their experience, strength and hope at the 5th AA Haridwar Convention on an apt theme — "towards spiritual awakening".

"The convention is a thanksgiving event at the serene, tranquil retreat to renew our sobriety 'one day at a time', and pass on the message to the still-suffering alcoholics that a sober and useful life is possible without a drink," says Suryakant, one of the organisers.

AA, according to him, is a fellowship of men and women who come together to solve their common drinking problem. Founded by two alcoholics, Dr Bob and Bill W, on June 10, 1935, in Akron (Ohio) in the US, the AA boasts of over 1.23 lakh groups across 180 countries. In India, AA has over 900 groups, comprising over 40,000 sober members.

Free membership is open to anyone who wants to do something about his or her drinking problem, Suryakant says, underlining that AA's primary purpose is to help alcoholics achieve sobriety.

The fellowship's book, titled *Alcoholic Anonymous*, outlines AA's 12 Steps, a set of spiritual principles. When practised as a way of life, these can root out the obsession to drink and enable a suffering alcoholic to recover from alcoholism.

The stories of the recovering alcoholics are nothing short of miracles. "Meri kahani arsh se farsh tak aur phir arsh tak ki hai (Mine is a riches to rags and back to riches story)," says Amulya, a recovering alcoholic with over 10 years' sobriety.



Participants at the AA Haridwar convention held in the second week of November. TRIBUNE PHOTO

The only child of a well-to-do family from Delhi, Amulya had his first taste of beer in the starting year of professional college. Along with graduating in computer science, he soon graduated from beer to hard drinks — vodka during the day and whisky in the evening. By the time he got married at 25, he was a full-blown 24x7 alcoholic despite vociferous protests from his parents and his wife.

On the professional front, he was the star employee with an MNC. "The birth of a daughter and a well-deserved early promotion called for a big bash at our house in Delhi. While other guests enjoyed their drinks followed by sumptuous food, I was drinking well into the wee hours, embarrassing myself and my family," he recalls, adding that he assaulted his parents and wife in full public view when asked to stop.

"With no love life at home, secondary addictions, especially paid sex, soon took over my life. For the next almost 10 years, I made life hell for my parents, wife and kid. Cheap whisky on the rocks and sexual escapades culminating into

binge drinking put my personal and professional life also on the rocks," he says.

"Divorce and job loss pushed me into self-pity and a morass of uncontrolled drinking. The death of my parents in a car accident proved to be the proverbial last straw. Such was my moral and spiritual bankruptcy that I showed up to lit the funeral pyre sozzled. Holed up in my room, I wished for the end, even making a feeble suicide attempt. It was a hopeless state of mind and body," quips Amulya, as his eyes well up.

However, an AA pamphlet offering help to problem drinkers provided him a ray of hope. "Hoping against hope, I strayed into an AA meeting where I found unconditional love. After a few weeks of my last experiments with alcohol, I started staying sober through AA's 12 Steps," he asserts.

Ultimately, he was re-united with his family. "By God's grace and to my utter surprise, my wife and daughter accepted me. I, along with my wife, started a small business. My relations with my daughter and other near and dear ones have shown a marked improvement. I am trying to be a useful member of the family. Finally, I am at peace with myself and the world around," Amulya signs off.

At Haridwar, there was no dearth of such stories — resonating hope amidst gloom.

'For 23 years, I died daily, then everything changed

BEFORE my marriage in February 1975, I disliked alcohol so much that I developed a strong resentment against my husband when he drank beer. However, on Holi day, I was given a glass of *bhang*; it is *Bhole Shankar ka parshad*, I was told. I liked the *saroor*, the kick, as I gulped down the second glass.

Soon, I started giving my husband company — just two drinks. The birth of my son and daughter gave me the freedom to drink as the family was now complete.

By 1980, I started taking a couple of drinks before my husband could join me for the evening drinking session. Soon, I discovered the afternoon peg to numb my feelings. A few years later, in Delhi, I manipulated household expenses to get liquor. The bottle took over and the family took a backseat — no emotional bonding with the husband and the kids.

In the late 1980s, the afternoon drink gave way to the morning peg to calm the overnight hangover. The kids developed a strong dislike for me since I was too drunk to celebrate their achievements.

I thought I would die soon as I was poisoning myself. To satiate my craving, I started buying liquor from the neighbourhood stores. I cared two hoots for the social stigma attached to a woman buying liquor openly. I could notice the pain in my parents' eyes when I used to land at their place completely sozzled.

I completely lost my self-confidence. I would drink till the liquor lasted or till I passed out. The nightmare continued till 1996. My sister took me to an AA meeting which I attended to please my family, not for myself.

I, as the lone woman member, vowed never to return to AA. I lost my individuality and self-confidence and started suppressing my feelings. From 1996 to 1998, I became a 24x7 drinker. Liver cirrhosis had started setting in. Vomiting



became a routine. Mental fog had set in, clouding my thinking.

A doctor pronounced liquor as being fatal for me. Ironically, I was happy since I wanted to die as I felt there was nothing worthwhile left in my life. I was sick and tired of my life. In desperation, I contacted AA in March 1998. Two women took me to a ladies' AA meeting. Meanwhile, I consumed my quota in the washroom. That binge continued for a week though I attended meetings.

I drank till the midnight of April 3, 1998. The next day, for the first time, I attended the meeting sober, getting a standing ovation. A happy, joyous and free way of life followed, courtesy AA's 12 Steps. AA restored my self-confidence and individuality.

For 23 years, I was dying everyday, AA gave me a new lease of life.

Initially, for about five years, the recovery was not easy as there was social stigma attached to women alcoholics. Full faith in God, AA and family support kept me on the right track though I was the lone lady member in the group. As more women alcoholics started coming in, we opened a women's group in New Delhi to make recovery easy for the women alcoholics, who still face a variety of challenges.

Now helping still-suffering alcoholics, practising the AA programme in all my affairs and a firm belief in God keeps me sober and happy.

— **Neha (name changed), sober for 27 years now**

Facing an existential crisis, independent filmmakers fight for survival in the shrinking space for such films in theatres and OTT platforms

RENU SUD SINHA

DESPITE its world premiere at Cannes (2023) and winning multiple awards at other international festivals, Kanu Behl's *Agra* is still struggling to reach the people it was meant for — the domestic audience.

For a film that had an arduous journey of nine years just to reach viewers at home, there were only nine major screens playing it across India — all of them peripheral. In the entire Delhi-NCR region, *Agra* got only three screens, two of them in Gurugram and Ghaziabad, playing mostly morning shows. It was a similar story in Mumbai. In contrast, a big budget film that was released simultaneously had 4,000 screens.

"Heartbroken and angry, I started posting on Twitter because I didn't know what else to do," shares director Kanu Behl. The retweets and shares soon took a life of their own, very much a sign that the angst was not confined to only one individual. That's because Behl is not the only independent filmmaker to face these challenges; all of them have faced similar struggles at some point in their careers.

Within a couple of days of the film's release, 46 independent filmmakers posted a joint statement, highlighting the long-standing systemic issues affecting the entire independent film community in India — the shrinking space for such films in theatres and streaming platforms and, paradoxically, the growing reliance of OTT platforms on a film's theatrical performance as a prerequisite for its acquisition. This unsustainable and shrinking cultural space is eliminating entire generations of independent filmmakers, it read.

The spontaneous movement that started as a WhatsApp group of five persons has close to a hundred members and the numbers are only growing. They are planning to launch a formal body very soon.

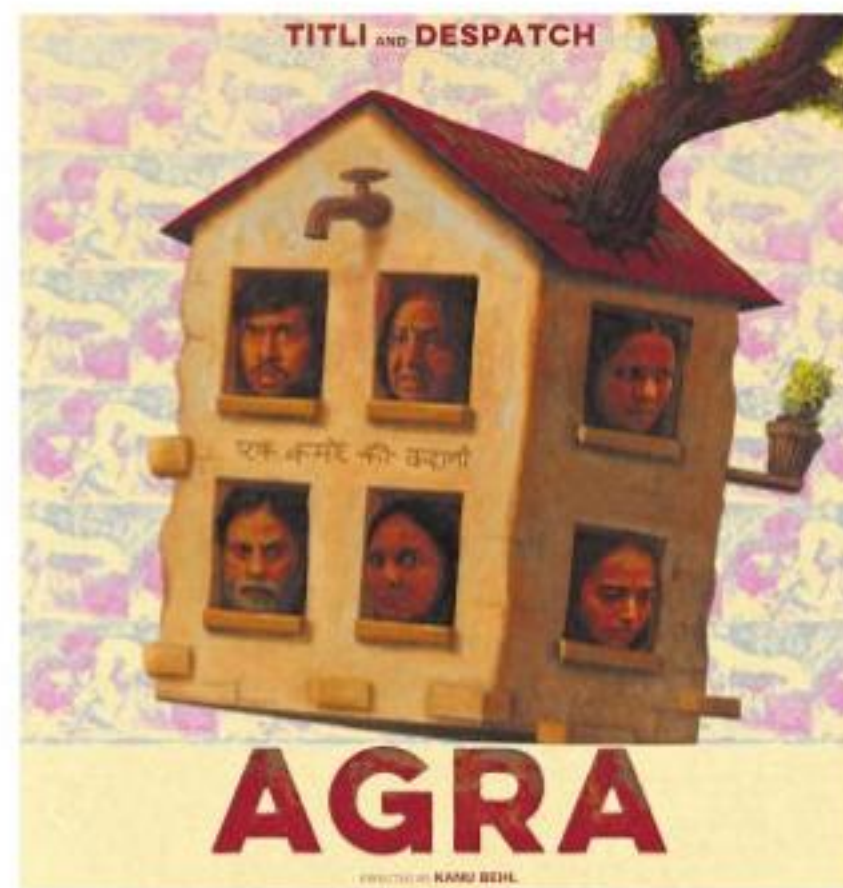
"It's been happening for a long time with most independent filmmakers," says Honey Trehan, casting director, filmmaker and an indie producer, who is among the 46 signatories.

"Most small films never get any space. And there's nobody to speak up for these

INDIEGNATION



Independent filmmakers who made a joint appeal (left) want resolution of basic issues like ease of theatrical release, decent number of screens, accessible theatre locations, at least one prime-time slot, and a cap on ticket prices.



films," says another signatory, Alankrita Shrivastava, writer-director of *Lipstick Under My Burkha*, *Made in Heaven*, *Bombay Begums*, etc.

For National Award winning filmmaker Bhaskar Hazarika, who is also part of this movement, the common challenge remains "finding a decent theatrical release for our films".

Director, writer and producer Shonali Bose (*Margariya with a Straw*), *The Sky is Pink*, an independent filmmaker of 25 years, says nothing has changed. "There has never been any respect and space for independent cinema in this country. From making to releasing, we struggle at every step to get any space for our films. Awards and recognition at global festivals do get us some attention but the real fight starts after that," adds the award-winning filmmaker.

Behl is very vocal about the need for structural support and some fundamental

changes in the system if these independent voices are to survive.

While funding remains a key challenge for these small budget films (most have a budget between ₹3 crore and ₹7-8 crore), there is never much money for publicity, and distribution is always a major hurdle. All indie filmmakers emphasise on resolution of basic issues like ease of theatrical release, decent number of screens, accessible theatre locations, at least one prime-time slot, and a cap on ticket prices.

Author and film journalist Aseem Chhabra, who is the festival director of the New York Indian Film Festival, also feels that if this lack of access is resolved, people will come. "There is definitely an audience. At most film festivals, indie films are sold out because people are starving and hungry for such films."

When multiplexes opened some decades ago, they raised hopes about providing a few smaller theatres where indie films

could also be shown. They reneged on that promise just as major streaming platforms, who also initially spoke about giving space to independent films but backed out later, adds the film journalist. "Art needs to be supported. Multiplexes are private entities. If they are only bothered about profits and not keen to show thought-provoking cinema, then government support becomes crucial," adds Chhabra.

Earlier, state-sponsored theatres like Akashvani theatre in Mumbai, run by All India Radio (now Prasar Bharati), would show off-beat movies. Nandan theatre in Kolkata, a government-sponsored film and cultural centre with modern amenities like digital projection and Dolby sound, still shows films, particularly Bengali films, at affordable ticket prices. It is, perhaps, time to revive and expand such initiatives if independent cinema has to survive in India.

Trehan and Hazarika point out another anomaly. Worldwide, cinema comes under

art and culture, making it easier for independent filmmakers to get government support, grants, funding, etc. In India and some other countries, it comes under the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting.

Most filmmakers including Behl, Shrivastava, Trehan, and Hazarika, cite the example of France and why it has such a healthy film culture. The French government supports its films at the Cannes Film Festival, providing automatic and selective funding for production and distribution. It also offers a 30 per cent rebate on production expenses for the French films that qualify.

That's why they reiterate that government support is a must for these kinds of films to survive. "When these films win awards at Cannes and other such festivals, it is the country that gets accolades and respect. The government should support or at least ensure that these films get a decent release for a fixed period and the shows are not cancelled at the last minute," says Trehan.

"Any film getting selected in the top five international film festivals — Venice, Berlin, Cannes, Toronto, Sundance — or which wins the National Award should be guaranteed a release. The Indian government, exhibitors, distributors should at least support such films and filmmakers," adds Trehan, who was recently awarded a National Award as the producer of *UlozhuKKu*, a Malayalam film.

Upset at the discriminatory treatment against indie filmmakers, Trehan is quick to point out, "If films like *Gadar 2*, *Chhava* and *The Sabarmati Report* could be screened in Parliament, then why not Payal Kapadia's *All We Imagine as Light* (nominated for the Palme d'Or at Cannes, making her the first Indian to be nominated in the main competition in 30 years)? It also won the Grand Prix, the second-highest award at the 2024 Cannes Film Festival."

As plans get concretised for the launch of a formal body soon, most filmmakers are hopeful of the change a collective voice can bring. Trehan sums it up perfectly: "If these independent voices don't get any support from the government or audiences, the next generation of Satyajit Rays, Shyam Benegals, Govind Nihalanis, Ritwik Ghataks, Ketan Mehtas or Saeed Mirzas will not be born."

NEW LABOUR CODE: PUSH POWER, URBAN REFORMS NEXT

NDIA has the right to expect not a series of recommendations framed in the light of the existing crisis, but a considered programme for development of labour policy. Thus spoke the Royal Commission of Labour in India in 1931.

The piety was waylaid since independence. India got commissions, recommendations, and many laws—over 100 state and 40 central laws—for protecting workers’ interests. The irony is embedded in data. Only 50 crore of the over 80 crore in the 15-64 age cohort are in the labour force, with barely one in 10 employed in the formal sector.

This week, the government took a significant step, unveiling four new codes for labour by rationalising 29 central laws. It cuts the number of rules from 1,436 to 351, filing of returns from 31 to one, and eases the pain of compliance. Much depends on the quality of the rules’ framing, which is expected in the next 45 days for the system to be operational by April 2026.

The journey of the reform merits attention. In the 2017 Budget, Arun Jaitley announced, “Legislative reforms will be undertaken to simplify, rationalise, and amalgamate the existing labour laws into four codes.” Although the amalgamation was completed by 2020, adoption by states was stranded between the babudom in Delhi and in state capitals, and electoral considerations over five years.

The fact that a coalition with a majority in parliament for over 10 years and in power in 15-odd states struggled to push reforms illuminates the strong consensus for weak reforms across political parties. The push—catalysed by the Trump tariff tantrum—arrives at a critical intersection. Foreign direct investment into India has been tepid. Private investment is poor—corporates prefer to be in cash, maybe because of uncertainty, maybe pessimism.

As global disruptions threaten business models and job creation, structural flexibility is critical. Fixed-term contracts (with benefits) afford options of costs and tenure for employers and employees. What is seen as a fixed cost by companies can well be a variable cost. The promise of funds for skilling, work-from-home provisions, provisions for women and gig workers should boost formalisation.

There are gaps. The new template promises a universal minimum wage for organised and unorganised sectors and a national floor below which no state can fix wages. India has had a sketchy record on fixing a national floor wage. Since 2018, there have been three committees, including one which recommended ₹375 as the minimum daily wage, and the government is appointing one more now.

The quest for investment-led growth demands that momentum and motivation for reforms must be leveraged. India’s power sector is a mess of multiple tariffs, cross-subsidies, and inefficiencies. The state power distribution companies do not collect dues on a sixth of the power generated—do the math for 16 percent of 1,693 billion units. The revenue gap is ₹3 lakh crore and accumulated losses are now at ₹7.04 lakh crore. Thanks to unfunded free power to farmers and households, discoms charge higher from those who pay. The tariff—which is higher than, say, Vietnam or Indonesia—hurts India’s investment prospects.

A new bailout is on the anvil strapped to the New Electricity Bill of 2025. The 2001 bailout cost the government ₹35,000 crore. In 2012, ₹1.5 lakh crore owed by discoms to banks was shifted to states. In 2015, under the Uday scheme, debt of ₹4.3 lakh crore was parcelled to the Centre and states. The 2025 bailout bill starts at ₹1.1 lakh crore. It promises all that was promised in the previous bailouts too—cost-reflective tariff, open distribution, and transparency on subsidies. Real change requires shifting to a system of prepaid coupons or direct benefit payments for farmers and households. Let the states show it in their books.

Yes, India is the fastest-growing economy, but speed must be accompanied by quality of life. An urban India gasping for breath in winter, wading through water in monsoon, and commuting for hours through bad roads reflects systemic apathy. For over three decades, the promise of the 74th constitutional amendment—transfer of funds and functions to urban bodies—has been hijacked by politics. Fixing the mess is both a human and an economic imperative—urbanisation is a proven growth multiplier.

Investors domestic and global expect timely justice. They are haunted by delays in the judicial system to get contracts enforced. There are over 5.4 crore cases pending across courts—4.77 crore cases in the lower courts, 63.78 lakh cases in high courts, and 90,225 cases in the Supreme Court. The pendency is aggravated by unfilled posts for judges and court capacity. Fixing this mayhem would be a major reform.

India needs to redo its regulatory plumbing clogged by a plethora of registrations and compliances. It needs a common identity readable across levels of government for regulators to access underlying compliances. Do a flowchart of clearances by department and geography, and shrink the permission raj and the attendant corruption.

India’s 146-crore consumers’ domestic market and a young workforce are definite draws for global investors. Reforms pushed in recent months—the GST rate restructuring, the revocation of quality control orders, the new labour codes—have the world’s attention. That said, in Robert Frost’s words, there are miles to go and much left to be done.

CAVILLING OPPN PERILLING DEMOCRACY



POWER & POLITICS

PRABHU CHAWLA
prabhuchawla@newindianexpress.com
Follow him on X @PrabhuChawla

DEMOCRACY does not collapse with a bang. It withers in silence when its challengers forget how to fight. The Bihar debacle has not merely cost the opposition a state; it has stripped Indian democracy of a viable opposition. The verdict has come like a cold slap across the face of the INDIA bloc, not because it is unexpected, but because it is humiliating in its clarity. A vast political experiment that promised reinvention has stumbled again into its familiar abyss of disunity and personality battles.

The Bihar election was no routine loss. It exposed the hollowness of the opposition’s promise and the absence of a voice that could ignite mass hope. This defeat is not just about one state. It is a signal flare illuminating a larger national tragedy: India currently has no viable opposition capable of countering the mighty BJP. This vacuum is dangerously deepening.

In Bihar, there was no single face, and no coherent message. The message of survival eclipsed the message of change. The BJP did not need to boast about its national strength. Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s mesmerising messages and missionary commitment alone dominated the narrative as a mask of order and certainty. It is astonishing because Bihar is a land that once gave India the greatest political uprising against concentrated power during the Emergency. Today, that same land watches parties fight like feral siblings defending shrinking fiefdoms. Leaders who cannot unite their own cad-

res are dreaming of uniting the nation.

Sadly, the opposition hasn’t learnt lessons from the past. There were times when opposition was not built through press conferences and social media outrage, but through blood, prison, sacrifice, and a cause larger than individual ambition. There was a time when Indira Gandhi appeared invincible. Yet opposition emerged not from one party, but from a movement. Jayaprakash Narayan—aged, frail, with no aspiration for office—walked into history with nothing but moral courage. He united socialists, communists, conservatives, farmer unions, labour activists, students, and raucous regional chiefs into one mighty wave that toppled a political empire. Those who joined him were not seeking portfolios. They were staking futures.

Contrast that with today’s opposition leaders, many of whom behave more like shareholders of personal political enterprises than custodians of a public cause. Most negotiations in the INDIA bloc are about seats, not mission. The opposition is dividing states by territory, as if national politics is a map for private distribution. Even in defeat, the leaders remain guarded about their turf. Parties fear losing relevance more than losing elections.

In the 1980s, when Rajiv Gandhi was swept into power on a wave of sympathy after the assassination of Indira Gandhi, it seemed that no force could challenge the young leader backed by a massive parliamentary majority. Yet V P Singh rebelled and emerged, not through inheritance or entitlement, but through his stand against corruption. His revolt did not start in back-room strategy sessions. He carried with him local titans like Devi Lal and Mulayam Singh Yadav, and farmers who could paralyse highways, and socialist organisers

who could fill town squares overnight. Leaders like M Karunanidhi in Tamil Nadu or NT Rama Rao in Andhra Pradesh, and Jyoti Basu in West Bengal did not plead for national attention; they commanded it by virtue of popular followings and a pan-India appeal. They defended their states fiercely, but were willing to align nationally when it resonated with public need.

Today, no such figures dominate the stage. India politics is plagued with a leadership famine. There is leadership, but no gravity. There are slogans, but no spark. The decline of the Left has left a void in ideological discourse. Even where popular parties remain strong, their leaders are insulated by ambition. Mamata Banerjee fights Delhi only when it threatens Kolkata. K Chandrasekhar Rao narrates Telangana pride but refuses to meld it into a broader national democratic project. Akhilesh Yadav guards Uttar Pradesh like an heirloom and avoids larger coalition leadership. The Aam Aadmi Party tries to monopolise its own brand rather than accept a common umbrella. Every leader seeks unity, but under their personal flag.

In this vacuum, the BJP enjoys a monopoly without effort. Its organisational machinery marches without fatigue. Its central face towers above regional leaders and its narrative is simple, consistent, and constantly broadcast: stability, nationalism, development, security. The opposition offers no counter-vision, only counter-commentary.

The implications of such dominance are serious. A democracy without a viable opposition risks losing its reflexes. When one party becomes the centre of gravity, institutions deform toward it. Bureaucracy bends. Investigation agencies chase selective targets. Media amplifies power in exchange for access. Economic oligarchies

flourish under political monopolies. Social polarisation becomes a convenient instrument, not a last resort. When people no longer see alternatives, they stop demanding accountability. Leaders begin to believe they embody the will of the nation.

India has seen such concentration before, and challenged it before. But challenges did not come from weak alliances stitched for electoral arithmetic. They arose from a moral summons that forced ordinary citizens into collective action. JP was not charismatic in the modern media sense; V P Singh was not a mass orator. What they possessed was legitimacy. They generated trust. Trust turned into momentum, which turned into regime change.

If the opposition today seeks resurrection, it cannot rely on dynastic claims, personality cults, defensive coalitions, grievance rhetoric, or part-time politicians. It must rediscover the spirit of political movement rather than political management. It requires a leader—or a collective of leaders—whose legitimacy does not depend on position but on sacrifice. Someone who can speak for unemployed youth with authenticity, for marginal farmers with lived empathy, for women, workers, for constitutional institutions facing erosion, and minorities not as voters but as citizens deserving rights.

That leadership must emerge from below, not from drawing rooms or a dynasty. It must be willing to challenge state excess on the streets, not just inside television studios. It must accept that opposition is not an election strategy; it is a constitutional responsibility. The future of India’s opposition depends on whether it can abandon short-term territorial insecurity and cultivate a shared ideological horizon. If it fails, the democratic ecosystem will continue to erode, leaving the BJP and Modi unchallenged as default rulers of Indian destiny. India’s democracy cannot function on a single epic narrative forever. For the health of a *viksit* and *surakshit* Bharat, another narrative must appear: For now, that narrative has no author. Until someone rises with conviction greater than ambition, the story of opposition will remain a story of an avoidable and abominable defeat.



SOURAV ROY



THE THIRD EYE

SHANKKAR AIYAR
Author of *The Gated Republic, Aadhaar: A Biometric History of India's 12 Digit Revolution, and Accidental India*
(shankkar.aiyar@gmail.com)

FROM CHIC AND CHICORY TO CHIKIRI CHIKIRI



INTEREST FREE

SANTWANA BHATTACHARYA
Editor
santwana@newindianexpress.com

SOME films arrive like VVIPs at an election rally. All pomp and entitlement. Others, like *Peddi*, wander in like a gaily-coloured street drummer—kicking up dust, making up for the lack of hoardings and arranged crowds with sheer life and loud self-declaration. People form circles around them, unable to resist the charm. Ram Charan’s latest is the latter kind of storm. Within hours of landfall, it had all of South Asia spinning around in a blender, forgetting its billion woes, instantly magnetised by *‘Chikiri Chikiri’*—Sridevi’s daughter catching the vibe as if she’s finally shrugged off the weight of inheritance and discovered the freedom of movement.

It was a quake with many epicentres. Kadapa to Colombo, Karachi to Kathmandu—every *kasba* was rocking to its own bootleg. Bengaluru techies are practising footwork between Jira updates. Dhaka schoolgirls have adopted it as their recess-time anthem. Then Tamil aunties in Singapore started re-

cording reels like college kids. *‘Chikiri Chikiri’* soon mutated, like a superbug pouncing in from some primeval forest, into a transcontinental contagion. Because, why not? The internet likes chaos, and nobody does that better than India. Now, Korean teens are up-loading impromptu flash mob versions, as if *‘Chikiri Chikiri’* was always meant for their razor-cut K-pop looks! It’s escaped the subcontinent without bothering to check out.

We’ve seen these eruptions before. Our bloodstream carries strong memories of being colonised by *Pushpa*—a swaggering epic of the underdog that refused to be tamed by the dictates of ‘good taste’. Allu Arjun, Rashmika... for a while, we were all covered in that red earth, like dappu drummers in a Rayalaseema village.

Peddi is from that same soil—the ‘non-elite’ DNA of popular Indian cinema. These are not just cinematic events. They are political markers. They tell us, often earlier than pollsters do, where India’s inner ground is shifting.

For over three decades now, the grammar of Indian politics has been changing—2014 was no lightning strike; it was scripted to ride a long, rumbling subaltern tide. For years before that, the old custodians—the pedigreed, permanently-in-government babu class—had found the floor wobbling under their curated carpets. The saffronists were just quick to spot it and launch a marketable version.

Now, even those who once inherited power like family silver are scrambling to cosplay subaltern grit. Rahul Gan-

The superhit from *Peddi* carries the energy of a loud, impatient country. The subaltern age is already here, shooting endless reels. These are not just cinematic events—they are political markers

dhi has a bit of his father’s pre-political avatar in him, a way with those things where the manual meets the mechanical. But all that jumping into rivers with fishermen, painting walls with daily-wage masons, lending a hand to carpenters—that’s perspiration rediscovered in the self, and recast as performative political language.

Others are to the manner born, natives to the terrain. Mamata Di was an early avatar. Proletarian in practice, not just theory: Long before ‘authenticity’ became a branding strategy, she marched across Bengal in rubber slippers and wiped Left aristocrats like Jyoti Basu and their red-label kingdoms clean off the map. Before her, there were the auto-chthones. Not city grunge artistes, but real country wrestlers with their mudgars and earthy witticisms. The Mulayams and the Lalus, the pioneers.

Meanwhile, in our proletarianised present, poor Shashi Tharoor, armed only with clipped English and Fabindia kurtas, seems genuinely baffled. And old dyed-in-wool Congressis—who assumed they were born to be in the Rajya Sabha—are sulking like theatre actors denied a part.

This is where the country is at. Those

once kept outside the soundproof Chatham Houses of the elite now control the volume knob. Their idioms are loud, impatient, and do not carry English subtitles. You either get *‘Chikiri Chikiri’* or you don’t.

Ram Charan’s character, like Pushpa’s, carries that energy. *Peddi* isn’t trying to be chic. It only wants to be pulsing with unruly joy, like a village fair that won’t make it to the Condé Nast Top 50 and doesn’t care. It may have all the elegance of a truck reversing in monsoon slush. That’s why it works. It’s people music, it swings hard, it takes us to the jungle, it’s mad enough to make us hop like rabbits, if our knees permit. For a while, it makes us forget the per capita GDP.

Though let’s not romanticise too much: ‘people-friendly’ is now a lucrative commodity, complete with marketing playbooks and algorithms. Authenticity trends, so trends pass off as authentic.

But they do tap into some hidden mother lode. South Asia, long conditioned to mimic Western templates, now produces beats that need no World Bank grant. It’s *sui generis*, internal and newly self-assured—occasionally overconfident, like a teenager who’s just discovered protein shakes.

The subaltern age isn’t a future messiah. It’s already here—shooting endless reels. Will *‘Chikiri Chikiri’* vanish as fast as it exploded? Probably. Once there was a *‘Kolaveri Di’*. Remember? But that misses the point. Earlier, Indian cinema observed such characters like anthropological specimens. “Them”. Today, they’re “us”.

QUOTE CORNER

The resolution is disgraceful... You have the two states which have been executing the genocide, the US and Israel, in charge, while the victims, the Palestinians, who are hoping for some form of self-determination, will get none. They're going to be treated like colonial victims, people who need guardianship to run them. It's hard to believe that in 2025 this is where we're at.

John Mearsheimer, Distinguished Service Professor at Chicago University on the Security Council clearing an International Stabilization Force for Gaza

We don't go into a meeting where we just do this dog-and-pony show, exchange memorandums, take a nice picture, and then forget.

Nara Lokesh, Andhra Pradesh IT minister, on \$120-bn investment pledges

I refuse to be a battered wife hoping it all goes away and gets better.

Marjorie Taylor Greene, MAGA leader announcing resignation from the US Congress, after a public spat with Donald Trump



MAILBAG WRITE TO

Delay reasons

Ref: *States stuck with gov delays* (Nov 22). The five judges' agreement on the Presidential reference followed constitutional order. The Tamil Nadu governor's reasons for returning bills or referring them that were not made apparent. If made public, the people who have the right to know can draw their own conclusions. It would avoid the issue from being used as political leverage, with parties blaming others and dragging the judiciary into it.

C P Rabindranath, Paravai

Insufficient advisory

The Supreme Court acknowledges that governors' delays undermine federalism, yet its advisory opinion offers no substantive remedy. Institutional inaction leaves the system just as stalled as the pending bills. If the courts won't act, must not lawmakers set binding timelines?

Resham Khan, Dehradun

Guild gripe

Ref: *Unions growl, India Inc weighs 4 labour codes* (Nov 22). The four labour codes will benefit both permanent and contract employees, and move towards equal remuneration for male and female employees. Social security, safety at workplace, and employee rights will be protected. But it won't be better for labour unions, as their grip over labourers will be reduced as a result.

Jishi R, Kollam

Unbearable pressure

Ref: *Teacher dies by suicide due to SIR workload* (Nov 22). It is very painful to know of schoolteacher Arvind Mulji Vandher's death near Ahmedabad. Those assigned for special intensive revision duties as booth level officers should be protected by the government, which must comprehensively act against the pressure on them. The strategy should focus on immediate workload reduction, systemic reform of non-academic duties, and comprehensive mental health support. The primary cause of stress—SIR duties—must be addressed immediately

in order to avoid repetition in other states.

V K S Krishnan, Kumbakonam

Noble nuptial

Ref: *A wedding against all odds* (Nov 21). The marriage, it seems, was destined to be solemnised and the bridegroom proved it by promptly tying the knot at the hospital bedside of his seriously-injured bride. This noble gesture truly deserves appreciation. May the injured bride regain her health at the earliest, and may the couple be blessed with life-long conjugal happiness.

Kelath Gopakumar Menon, Thrissur

Wrong picks

Ref: *India A ousted after Super Over loss* (Nov 22). It is really painful to know that India A team paid a heavy price for clumsy batting and bowling to succumb to Bangladesh A in the semi-finals. No doubt, our bowlers faltered. But it was a folly of our captain and coach to overlook a dynamic batsman like Suryavanshi for the Super Over. Hope the cricket board takes corrective steps to coach the coaches to

be unbiased while selecting the playing XI.

N Mahadevan, Chennai

Usury concern

Ref: *Moneylenders harass man to suicide* (Nov 22). Being fully aware of the risks involved, private moneylenders provide fast loans on flexible terms to hard-pressed individuals who do not qualify for traditional bank loans. When borrowers default, the moneylenders cannot take the law into their own hands to pester and harass their customers.

Doddi Vishnu Sankara Rao, Hyderabad

Tiger habitats

Ref: *Are tigers trying to reclaim their territory in Karnataka?* (Xplore, Nov 22) Long-term habitat improvement, strict regulation of tourism and illegal activities, and prompt compensation to win villagers' trust are vital for sustainable coexistence with tigers. The senior officials agree that urgent, well-documented interventions and consistent field presence are keys to addressing the complex issue.

Uthira Nedumaran K, email

GAU MATA, THE ‘SHRINE OF COMPASSION, CULTURE AND WISDOM’

VANAM JWALA NARASIMHA RAO

PARTICIPATING in the birth centenary celebrations of Bhagwan Sri Sathya Sai Baba at Puttaparthi on November 19, Prime Minister Narendra Modi eloquently invoked the ‘central value of India’s great civilisational spirit’.

In a symbolic and compassionate gesture, he announced the donation of 100 Gir cows to support their economic, nutritional, and social well-being. His message emphasizing that cows reflect the country’s ancient wisdom, compassion, and ecological harmony, resonated deeply.

The timeless message of ‘seva-service’ was the heart of his address.

‘Each of the path of bhakti, gyan or karma is connected to Seva,’ Modi stated, recalling Baba’s guiding principle: Help Ever, Hurt Never.

Modi spoke passionately about Gau Mata, revered in Indian tradition as a motherly figure, symbolizing life, prosperity, compassion, and sustainability in the traditional Indian context. He highlighted the immense contribution of cows to rural economies and to global development, referring to the initiatives of Rashtriya Gokul Mission (RGM) in Varanasi and the inspiring Girinka tradition of African Nation Rwanda, where India gifted Gir cows. He reiterated that in India, cows are an embodiment of traditional knowledge, cultural values, and spiritual symbolism.

The Prime Minister shared his personal experience of participating in a ‘Gau Daan’ program, where 100 cows were donated to poor farming families. He emphasised how in Indian tradition, the cow represents sanctity of life, nurturing wealth, and collective well-being.

These cows, he noted, would support their recipients’ economic stability, nutritional needs, and social harmony. Modi remarked that the message of prosperity through cow protection is visible across the world. He took pride in the success of RGM, where the female calf born from a distributed cow is gifted free of cost to farmers in other regions, thus promoting sustainable

cow population growth.

Sharing inspiring examples from across the globe, Modi spoke about Rwanda’s Girinka tradition, ‘May you have a cow,’ where the first female calf born is gifted to another family, ensuring shared prosperity. Modi mentioned Brazil’s success in adopting India’s Gir and Kankrej breeds and enhancing them through modern technology and scientific management, thereby turning them into superior dairy performers. These examples, he said, reflect how tradition, compassion, and scientific thinking can together transform the cow into a symbol of faith, empowerment, nutrition, and economic progress. This spirit, he observed, is now being carried forward with noble intent in Puttaparthi.

Ancient wisdom which emphasized reverence, compassion, and responsibility towards cows, as a living tradition that is being continued to inspire modern India was eulogized by Modi.

The cow valued for its utility as well as revered as ‘Gomata’, the universal mother, nurturing the body, mind, society, and soul is richly illustrated in our epics.

In the Valmiki Ramayana, king Vishwamitra once visited the hermitage of Brahmarshi Vashishta with his army. Vashishta welcomed him, and in true spirit of hospitality, arranged a sumptuous feast prepared by Shabala, the Divine Kamadhenu Cow. Astonished by her miraculous powers, Vishwamitra demanded that Vashishta give her to him.

Vashishta gently refused, explaining that Cow Shabala was his spiritual companion, the source of his peace, wealth, and wisdom. Even Kamadhenu proclaimed her relationship with Vashishta as spiritual. When the king attempted to seize her by force, she broke free and returned to Vashishta, who, out of compassion, permitted her to defend herself. In the process, from her emerged divine forces that defeated Vishwamitra’s army with ease, symbolizing spiritual energy that, divine prosperity, and dharma ultimately triumph over material might.

In the Vedas, Puranas, and Dharma Shastras, the cow is described as the



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living abode of divine energies. It is said that Brahma and Vishnu reside in her horns, Shiva in her forehead, the sacred rivers in her back, the Pitru Devatas (ancestors) in her hooves, and Mount Kailash in her stomach. Her milk is part of the sacred ‘Panchamrita’. Her entire body is said to hold sacred rivers, and her presence brings purity to the atmosphere. She is called the walking temple, the embodiment of sattva, peace, purity, and nourishing grace. Her presence is believed to purify the atmosphere, and her breath resonating Vedic vibrations. Circumambulating (pradakshina) is considered equivalent to walking around the sacred Universe.

Panchagavya, the five products of

cow, the milk, curd, ghee, dung, and urine, is spiritually revered and scientifically acknowledged for their medicinal, ecological, and agricultural benefits. Modern nutritional science recognises the value of native Indian cow milk in enhancing immunity, cognitive function, emotional stability, and physical nourishment for infants, elders, and patients.

Even cow dung, rich in nitrogen and micronutrients, improves soil health, fortifies crops, and serves as fuel, disinfectant, and a natural pest repellent. Traditionally, it was used to plaster floors, purify surroundings, and sanctify ritual spaces.

Cow urine, with proven antimicrobial properties, is used to purify toxins

and even support healing of chronic ailments. In villages, sprinkling it is believed to dispel negativity and restore harmony.

Our sages and scriptures have always glorified cows as the greatest wealth. Chyavana Maharshi declared that there is no treasure greater than cows. Spiritual Masters Valmiki, Vyasa, Adi Shankaracharya, Tulsidas, Kabir, the Buddha, Dayananda Saraswati, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, Swami Vivekananda, and Mahatma Gandhi spoke passionately about cow protection.

Lord Krishna, the divine cowherd, grew up as Gopala, the protector of cows. Kings Dilipa and sage Jamadagni considered cow protection a sacred duty. Manusmrithi prescribed ‘Gau Daan’ (donation of a cow) as the highest form of charity. It was believed that feeding one hungry cow was equivalent to performing a grand yajna.

The cow, a fountain of emotional, ecological, economic, and spiritual abundance, besides nourishing the stomach, enriches the heart, mind, and soul. She teaches sacrifice without expectation, service without demand, and sustenance without pride. Her gentle presence inspires peace. Her silent patience teaches selfless love. The dust from her feet is holy and sacred, believed to bless, heal, and purify more powerfully than sacred rivers.

Recognising the importance of cows

from across angles, for the first time in the state, Telangana Chief Minister A Revanth Reddy on June 17, envisaged a comprehensive cow protection policy, including establishing modern cow shelters (Goshalas) with adequate space for grazing and free movement. In a laudable directive, a three-member official committee was constituted to conduct an in-depth comprehensive study on all aspects of cows.

It may be apt to mention here that, recently, when I visited Planets Green Dates County, home to about 50 cows and a beautifully maintained cow shelter, adorned with a charming deity of Lord Krishna I was amazed. The reverence extended to ‘Gau Mata’ and the dedication to spread her profound message was deeply moving. I was awestruck by the serene scenes: cows gracefully moving, calmly feeding on fodder and water, calves suckling affectionately, and a skilled caretaker milking a cow with devotion.

India’s traditional practices centred around cow service in the context of today’s challenges, blend ecology with economy, spirituality with science, and compassion with cultivation.

Modi’s reminder that the cow is a civilizational symbol is both timeless and timely. To honour the cow is to honour life itself. To care for the cow is to care for creation. She is not just a giver of milk, but a giver of peace, prosperity, purity, and purpose. She is Gomata, the universal mother, the silent teacher, the spiritual companion, and the walking sanctuary of nourishment, purity, and divine grace.

Besides protecting and revering, let us learn from her, and recognize ‘Gau Mata’ as the ‘shrine of compassion, culture, and wisdom.’

Celebrating ‘Gau Mata’ implies honouring timeless heritage, embracing innovative sustainability, and envisioning a future where compassion, culture, science, and spiritual consciousness co-exist harmoniously, inspiring humanity to build a kinder, greener, wiser, peaceful, and inclusive world.

(The writer is Secretary of the Center for Brahmin Excellence)

Psychology can change the way food tastes

HARMEHAK SINGH

EVER eaten while doom-scrolling and realised you barely tasted anything? Or found your favourite pasta strangely bland after a stressful meeting, yet somehow delicious on a relaxed Saturday evening? We often think taste comes from ingredients and cooking techniques. But taste isn’t just on the plate. Our emotions, expectations – even the people sitting with us – can shape how food tastes.

This mind-food connection sits at the heart of gastrophysics, a field that studies how our senses, brain and mental states shape our eating experience. Once we know how this works, we can start using simple psychological shifts to make everyday meals taste richer, brighter and more satisfying, without changing a single ingredient.

Mindful eating means paying attention to each bite: noticing flavours, textures, aromas and the sensations in our body as we eat. But most of us don’t eat like this. We eat while scrolling, replying to messages or watching Netflix in the background. Our attention gets divided, our senses dull and we go into ‘autopilot’ mode. We chew quickly, swallow automatically and miss the subtle flavours and signals from our body telling us we are full. We also lose touch with our body’s hunger cues, which makes overeating more likely.

Normally, rising levels of the ‘hunger hormone’ ghrelin and gentle stomach contractions alert us it’s time to eat. But distraction makes those messages easier to ignore. Essentially, our body also has a sophisticated system to tell us to stop. As we eat, our stomach stretches, sending ‘fullness’ signals to the brain. At the same time, hormones such as leptin and cholecystokinin are released, creating a feeling of satiety that slowly builds over the course of a meal. When we’re distracted, we may miss this delicate hormonal conversation.

A 2011 study found that people who played a computer game during lunch felt less full afterwards, remembered less about their meal and snacked more later. Distraction also weakens the memory of eating – and when the brain forgets food, it will seek more food sooner. Appetite, therefore, isn’t just about biology. It’s shaped by our attention and memory



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too.

Slowing down, on the other hand, improves our sensory awareness. Suddenly, a tomato isn’t just ‘tomato-y’, it becomes sweet yet tangy, juicy yet firm. Chocolate doesn’t just ‘taste nice’, it melts slowly, bitter at first, then rich and velvety. Mindfulness acts like turning up the volume on our taste buds.

Mood as a flavour-enhancer:

Negative emotions such as stress, anxiety and frustration can dull our sensitivity to pleasant flavours. When we’re tense, our body prioritises survival, not enjoyment. Stress hormones narrow our attention, and pleasure-based functions such as flavour appreciation get pushed aside. That’s why food can taste flat when we’re upset. In one experiment, published in 2021, participants who watched a horror movie felt more anxious and rated juice as less sweet than those who watched a comedy or documentary film. The participants who watched the horror movie even drank more juice than the others – possibly trying to ‘find’ the sweetness their brain was suppressing.

These effects may be linked to physiological changes, as anxiety can influence autonomic nervous system activity and hormone levels that affect taste perception and consumption. When we feel calm, safe and socially connected, the opposite happens.

Our brain releases feel good chemicals such as dopamine and serotonin, and food tastes better. Think of how amazing your favourite food tastes when you’re laughing with friends or eating at a festival. So, if dinner suddenly tastes ‘off’, the recipe might be fine, your nervous system may just be in a different state.

Next time you’ve had a heavy day, try pausing for five minutes before eating. Play soft music, take a few deep breaths, or eat with someone who makes you feel relaxed. Food is what you think Before we even taste food, our brain forms predictions about what it should taste like. And those expectations shape what we taste. Visual cues do a lot of this work. We expect red foods to be sweet, green foods to feel bitter or sour, and golden-crisp foods to crunch. The sound of a crisp bite sends a signal to the brain that the food is fresh and satisfying.

Presentation matters:

Fancy plating isn’t just for Instagram. It changes taste perception. In a 2024 study, the shape, size, and colour of the plate shifted how appealing a dessert looked. The features of the plate also affected how much people thought it was worth, and even how modern or traditional it felt. Black plates made desserts seem more premium and exciting, while white plates made them feel more familiar and understated. Even the weight of cutlery changes our experience. Heavier cutlery gives the impression that the food is premium. Our sense of smell is another factor. When people had their noses blocked with nose clips for an experiment, a sweet drink tasted less intense and less satisfying, showing how aroma shapes the full flavour experience. This is exactly why food feels bland when we have a cold or a blocked nose.

So, what does all this mean for your next meal? It implies that you have more power than you think. Try eating something you love from a nice plate. Notice the colours. We don’t have to wait for a chef’s touch. With a little psychology, we can make everyday meals more satisfying and enjoyable.

(The writer is with Liverpool Hope University)

Dr Mohandas Surath, the single medicine wonder

DR HYMA MOORTY

Laboratory testing, diagnostics and prescription play a crucial role in medicine across specialties and settings. Although the sheer volume of tests that are conducted is staggering, the general belief is that a significant portion of these tests are quite unnecessary.

Research has shown that around 40 to 60 per cent of tests are unwarranted. Subjecting patients to unnecessary procedures is often driven by profit motives, be it to bolster pharmaceutical sales or hospital revenues or both. This can potentially lead to patient discomfort, harm and increased health care costs.

Moreover, unnecessary tests can trigger a ‘diagnostic cascade’, where false positives prompt further testing, causing a ripple effect and thereby needless interventions. Switching doctors or seeking a second opinion often means repeating the same painstaking tests, adding to the patients’ agony and burden.

While on tests, both required and unwanted, have you heard of a doctor who is a healer in its truest form and is not just a medical practitioner?

Out of the public eye and keeping people, nay patients, away from unwanted tests and extensive list of medications is Dr Mohandas Surath, a renowned neuro physician, who is the chief consultant neurologist at KIMS. Boasting of over 52 years of rich experience, Dr Surath’s areas of specialization include neuro-muscular disorders, neurological dysfunction, multiple sclerosis treatment, movement disorder, neurophysiology and vascular brain diseases. Multiple award winner for his immense contributions to the field, he has been decorated with ‘Life-



Dr Mohandas Surath

The fact that he is known as ‘The Single Medicine Doctor’ evidence that he epitomises simplicity and precision in his approach. He prescribes only what is truly necessary. Long prescriptions are anathema. This comes across as a refreshing contrast to the often test-heavy, high-tech medical landscape we see today. This has been experienced by innumerable patients with very rare health issues, who were treated by a battery of doctors only to be advised to undergo surgery abroad with no guaranteed success. Their hopes of recovery and survival get revitalised after just one consultation with Dr Surath, who prescribes a single inexpensive tablet. In a magical turn, the illness/ailment disappears.

time Achievement’ awards by several national and international Neurological Societies. His gentle care, endearing smile and reassuring words have a profound impact on his patients, as while doing so, he addresses not just the physical but the emotional aspect of their well-being.

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Mind you this is no isolated case as countless patients feel indebted to this ‘saviour’. When I think of this ‘Single Medicine Doctor’, my

thoughts go back to an episode in ‘The Ramayana’. When the battle between Lord Rama and Ravana was at its peak, Ravana’s son Meghnad, a powerful warrior shot a high-powered arrow at Lakshmana wounding him seriously and rendering him unconscious. The royal physician Sushena after examining Lakshmana stated that to treat Lakshmana, he needed Sanjeevani herb from The Himalayas. Hanuman, unable to identify the specific herb, lifted the entire Mount Drona Giri and brought it to the battlefield. The royal physician identified ‘The Single Herb’ and saved Lakshmana. To save a life, you needed a ‘single herb’ then and now a ‘single effective medicine’ can work wonders if diagnosed to precise levels.

Giving the patient the confidence that the individual needs is Dr Surath’s mantra. Patients adore him, which is not surprising, so to say.

His old school approach, rooted in compassion and clinical acumen, resonates deeply with those seeking genuine care. We must feel fortunate to have such a gem in our midst.

The gentle and soothing waves around him evoke a

sense of peaceful ocean lapping against the shores of patients’ worries, easing their concerns and calming their minds. Patients in his clinical cabin feel safe, seen, heard, cared, and reassured. This kind of approach inspires hope and positivity in his patients, helping them tap into their own strength and resilience. This is the beauty of compassionate care. To patients, a doctor like him is a godsend saviour, who is worthy of reverence.

People have deep respect and admiration for doctors who transcend the ordinary and touch lives with their extraordinary care and empathy. It’s a poignant reminder of the healthcare professionals can have on individuals and society as such.

“It is important to have human connection in health care where empathy, kindness, compassion and benevolence can be as powerful as any medicine”, says Dr Mohandas Surath. Away from the public glare, The ‘Miracle Man’ of many neuro imbalances, is back where he belongs and doing what comes naturally to him—attending to his next patient and helping them live with a ‘single medicine’.

DECCAN
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Shreya Sen-Handley

Off the beaten track

No time like present to
relish your diversity!

Thirteen years ago, in a column for *The Guardian*, I wrote about taking my tenderly young half-English children to a temple in Leicester to experience their first Durga Puja. Not a patch on the Pujas of Kolkata, with its amazing artistry, dazzling illuminations and epic hustle and bustle, this modest event still managed to capture that spirit of bonhomie. The 'bhog' was delicious and generously apportioned, and the organisers warm and welcoming to strangers like us rocking up to their marigold-draped door.

Our gold-and-purple sari-clad baby girl jigged her heart out with the resplendently dressed dancers, who rewarded her with their delight at her impromptu performance. Meanwhile, my toddler son was floored by the mouthwatering Luchi-Aloo-Dum, but bemused by the rapid-fire Bengali swirling around him, having spent his short years hearing his white Englishman father and Indian mother communicating in English, decided to join in with a resonating exit in SPANISH, "Adios Amigos!"

Causing much hilarity around him, it also convinced me to keep them attuned to their Indian heritage. Growing up in a lively but undiverse British city, without Indian family or community around us, we knew it would be up to us to provide them with a well-rounded upbringing. Giving them beautiful Sanskrit names (short ones so locals wouldn't struggle with them, yet they did), we dished up delicious Indian nosh frequently, keeping the Indian connection crackling through weekly videocalls and annual trips back, not to mention our inventive immersion in desi festivities, and they lapped it all up, fortunately.

Celebrating Diwali late this year because of school exams, we joyfully carried home sheesh kebabs, samosas, jalebis, aachars and mango lassi from the nearest Indian deli, cooking two kinds of daal and a big pot of mutton-aloo-gobi to go with it, as our teenagers lit twinkling diyas to the strains of Anoushka Shankar. Transported back to my vow of thirteen years ago, to keep the Indian fires burning for our progeny, it felt like we'd succeeded in shaping two open-minded, altruistic, global citizens, a lot Indian and enormously British.

Both children have half-jokingly striven to out-desi the other, but being British-born and bred, with British schooling and accents, and half-white genes (more obvious in my Mediterranean-looking son than my doe-eyed and dusky daughter), they're as British as Shakespeare, Cadbury's and Annie Lennox (Best of British, in other words). Talking of The Bard, coming from an Anglicized, widely-travelled Calcutta clan as I have, I've encouraged their love for British literature, theatre, history and entertainment, more even than their environment and many a white Briton with their own children. Our multicultural, empathetic and modern worldview has neither been rued nor questioned, by us or any other.

Until now, when the brown and black are constantly challenged to prove how British they are. If white supremacists and violent racists have been shadowy, slaving monsters all these years, existing beyond the pale of our everyday world, or even better, consigned to history, they've come out in force. They live next door; take a corner and you'll see fascist flags flying from many windows. They flourish in the headlines too, making them ever-present rather than distant, crawling out from under the slimy rubble that was their natural home. Now they're in every home and venerated; Nigel Farage, Robert Jenrick, and Katie Hopkins, amongst others.

POC are under siege instead. Not only facing daily vilification, abuse and threats from politicians and press, but the general populace. An Indian grandad is murdered by white teenagers whilst innocuously walking his dog. Several South Asian women are raped in the space of a few weeks in "racially aggravated" attacks. A highflying professional woman in a hijab is refused service in a shop, and she's far from alone but the only one who was heard. It's happened to me too, a brown woman in everyday Western clothes, blanked in an ice-cream parlour in Cornwall, which I'd imputed to their notorious insularity. But no, it is no longer relegated to dark corners, demonstrated by the summer of openly racist, violent riots we endured last year.

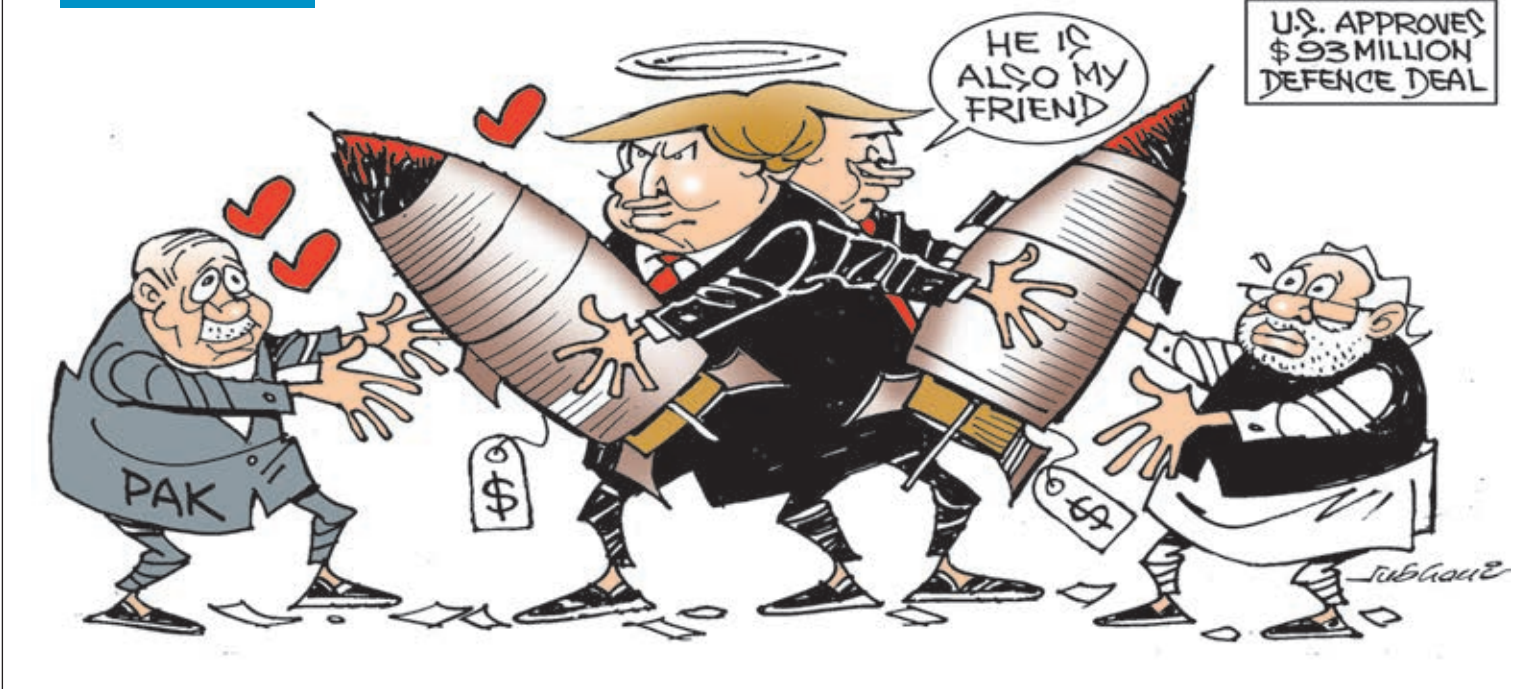
Sadly, Britain's not alone in this. Europe's witnessed a horrifying resurgence of fascism, with a few far right leaders like Italy's Giorgia Meloni having seized control, while the likes of France's Marine La Pen hover on the brink of power. And need anything more be said about Trump's takeover of the US? This self-appointed beacon of democracy is now a tinpot dictatorship, but more dangerous than most such banana republics in its rejuvenated imperial ambitions and vast size and strength. This rising tide of aggression against the different and the progressive is swamping all the world.

But then I think — hasn't it always been there, just papered over in recent decades? When I returned to India after having spent a good chunk of my childhood abroad, I thought and spoke differently to anyone at my school including the teachers, and was routinely punished for it. Made to stand outside the classroom daily to isolate and humiliate me for my "obharatiyo" or un-Indian ways, I stared at my scuffed shoes and plotted my escape. A decade later, after India's economic liberalisation, I became the youngest regional head of a multinational television channel, and those same teachers were beating down my door for favours for their offspring.

Life will always be cyclical, and the wheel of fortune's revolutions will set the world to rights again, to a place that prizes diversity and advancement, but as with every other era of encroaching darkness, those who care must light the way.

Shreya Sen-Handley is the award-winning author of *Memoirs of My Body*, short story collection *Strange and travelogue* Handle With Care. *She is also a playwright, columnist and illustrator.*

Subhani



If Cong doesn't transform,
new alternative inevitable



Pavan K. Varma

Chanakya's View

In the recently concluded Assembly elections, the Opposition in Bihar, including the new start-up Jan Suraj, has been decimated. The NDA coalition has swept the polls. A key take-away from these elections, is the steep electoral decline in the Congress, the only national Opposition party. In Bihar the Congress managed to get just six seats, and a meagre vote percentage of 8.7 per cent.

The Indian National Congress was once not merely a political party; it was a national movement, a repository of ideals and a crucible of leadership that shaped the destiny of a new nation. However, today the Congress finds itself in a state of unrelenting atrophy, as if trapped within a mausoleum of its own past glory.

Has the Congress withered away? The question arises with every successive electoral setback. The idea of the Congress is still relevant, but the party that can implement it has tragically unravelled. 1984 was the last time the Congress got an absolute majority. Since then, it has lost a long series of Lok Sabha and state elections. The erosion has been particularly precipitate after 2014, with the rise of the BJP under Narendra Modi. If one adds up all the parliamentary seats the Congress has won in three successive national elections — 2014, 2019 and 2024 — it still adds up to 195, 78 seats less than a simple majority.

Yet what is most striking is the absence of accountability, the refusal to introspect with the rigour that adversity demands. Among all the political formations in the democratic world, few exhibit the baffling ability to endure repeated failure with hardly a semblance of internal upheaval. The Congress appears

locked in a cycle of denial; leadership remains centralised, decision-making opaque, and dissent stifled with both aggression and indifference.

Why is the party bereft of the ability for internal reform? The answer perhaps lies in a structural inversion the party underwent over decades. The Congress that fought colonial rule was a decentralised mosaic of regional leaders, ideological currents, and ground level presence. In recent times, the same Congress has become, increasingly, a dynastic fiefdom, without organisational muscle, rewarding loyalty more than merit.

The Gandhi family cannot but bear a major responsibility for this state of affairs. It has either directly helmed the party during the period of decline, or indirectly been the de facto apex power. In any other organisation, public or private, repeated failure of this nature would have demanded change in leadership. If this has not happened in the Congress it is a myth that there can be no other alternative. However, such is the statis or inexplicable passivity within the party that this has not happened. A putative attempt was made by the so-called 'G-23', where some senior leaders attempted to start an internal debate on the need for urgent remedial action. It was a half-hearted and diffident attempt. All that its many meetings achieved was one letter to party president Sonia Gandhi.

But the hostility and aggression with which the family — and the predictable coterie that surrounds it — responded to this well-intentioned attempt, was surprising to say the least. Those who were part of the grouping were almost equated with

The BJP put all its publicity machinery to lampoon Rahul Gandhi, sometimes unfairly. Yet, this expected diatribe from political opponents cannot be the sole cause for the party's poor performance.

being betrayers encouraging something tantamount to mutiny. Many of the prominent leaders who were part of the group were ostracised, or their role in the party's management and projection marginalised, leaving them in no doubt that they did not anymore enjoy the trust of the leadership. At least two prominent names come to mind in this context, Shashi Tharoor and Manish Tiwari.

It is true, of course, that the BJP put all its publicity machinery to lampoon Rahul Gandhi, sometimes unfairly and viciously. Yet, this expected diatribe from political opponents cannot be the sole cause for the party's poor performance. Rahul must understand that memes and social media trolling is amplified precisely because the party continues to stumble from one electoral fiasco to another. Much of the malevolent animosity directed towards him would be neutralised if the electoral performance of the party substantially and qualitatively improves.

Can a new Congress arise from the ashes of the old? Historically, political regeneration in India has often required schism. The Congress itself has witnessed splits that paved the way for reinvention — from the early divisions of the pre-Independence era to the 1969 rupture that created the Congress (O) and Congress (R), eventually redefining the party's ideological contours. A party so weighed down today by inertia and internal sclerosis may indeed benefit from a decisive moment of reconstitution. New leadership liberated from hereditary entitlement, fresh ideological clarity and, above all, an

organisational revamp rebuilding the party from the grassroots upwards, is imperative. The last is particularly important because even if Rahul Gandhi attracts attention on social media, there can be no substitute for organisational strength which has today almost ceased to exist in many states, of which Bihar is only one example.

The nation must bluntly confront a fundamental truth: Indian democracy cannot flourish without a credible national opposition. A ruling party, however powerful or efficient, must be counterbalanced by an equally persuasive alternative. Democracy is not merely about electoral arithmetic; it is about the constant presence of choice. If one pole becomes overwhelming and the other collapses, the equilibrium that sustains democratic vitality is lost. The existence of a strong Opposition compels introspection within the government, moderates excesses, and enforces accountability.

Regional parties, even if dynamic, are not equipped to offer a cohesive national narrative. They remain anchored to local aspirations, indispensable in their contexts, but incapable of carrying the full weight of India's pluralistic imagination. The Congress once offered that unifying narrative, one that bridged regions, religions, languages, and classes. Its retreat from that role has seriously narrowed the space for ideological plurality.

If the Congress cannot — or will not — undertake this transformation, then the emergence of a new Congress, or a new alternative, born from the political bankruptcy of the old, may be inevitable. History rarely rewards institutions that refuse to evolve. But it often welcomes new political formations that rise to fill the vacuum left behind. Congress leaders and workers need to act before it is too late.

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

LETTERS
PRIDE OF INDIA

It is unfortunate that an Indian Air Force pilot was killed after a Tejas fighter jet, the pride of India, nosedived and crashed during one of the world's largest aviation exhibitions in Dubai. This is the second time crash for Tejas LCA since its induction and comes at a time the IAF is preparing to induct its advanced variant. We are confident that the Central government/ IAF would investigate the incident thoroughly and take corrective steps.

N. Mahadevan
Chennai

END NAXALISM

Naxalism in India is on its deathbed and counting its last days before its total extinction. The movement that had started as a protector of the rights of the downtrodden and oppressed in society had in the long run turned violent, instilling fear and hatred in the minds of those with belief and trust in the rule of law. It has resulted in huge and heavy loss of public and private properties and none can quantify the loss of human lives both on the sides of the "warriors of the poor" and the "oppressors" dubbed as enemies of the poor. Hope the few remaining Naxals in hiding will come out into the open and will start a new chapter of life free from violence. Naxalism, religious bigotry and radicalism are the evils that spoil and corrupt the peace of people anywhere in the world.

S.Nagarajan Iyer
Coimbatore

DEFINING HAPPINESS

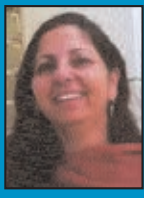
India stands at 118th in the World Happiness Report, trailing Finland (1st) and even neighbour Pakistan (109th). Yet happiness is not GDP alone—it is community, purpose and gratitude. Let us choose kindness over comparison, connection over competition and celebrate small joys daily. A happier India begins with us.

TS KARTHIK
CHENNAI

Mail your letters to
chennaidesk@deccanmail.com

Anita Katyal

Political
Gup-Shup



BJP has Nitish
on tight leash;
in UP, it's SIR
over surname

The Janata Dal (United) in Bihar is naturally pleased as punch at having returned to power for yet another term. But there is also a degree of apprehension about how its relationship with the Bharatiya Janata Party will pan out once the government settles down to work. The BJP may have been forced to concede the chief minister's post to Nitish Kumar but, JD(U) insiders maintain, their alliance partner is unlikely to give him an easy ride. Unlike the past, Nitish Kumar's bargaining power has been considerably reduced this time round. He does not have the option of threatening to walk on the BJP because he no longer has the option of teaming up with his old partners, the Rashtriya Janata Dal and the Congress since they don't have the numbers to prop up an alternate government. So even as celebrations were in full swing in the JD(U) camp, there were murmurs that the BJP has already made it clear that it will not play second fiddle in this dispensation. For instance, the BJP refused to give up its claim on the

post of Assembly speaker though Nitish Kumar was pushing his party's case. Having given up on the Speaker's post, the JD(U), it is said, wanted that only one deputy chief minister be appointed, but again, this proposal was vetoed by the BJP.

Krishna Allavaru, Congress Bihar-in-charge and a Rahul Gandhi camp follower, found himself in the eye of a storm when dismal poll figures for the party trickled in on counting day. Dramatic developments were witnessed at a Patna five-star hotel where Mr Allavaru was staying as angry local party workers started gathering in the lobby, waiting to confront the senior Congress leader. Mr Allavaru had already made himself unpopular with the party's state unit for the selection of candidates and for his inaccessibility. When told that the workers were waiting to meet him, Mr Allavaru packed up in minutes and slipped out for Delhi in order to avoid what promised to be an ugly showdown. His team was issued strict instructions not to reveal the

travel details of all Congress leaders from Delhi who had been camping in Patna for the duration of the election. As rumour went round that senior leaders would meet them, even more workers arrived at the hotel. When the wait proved futile, many workers ordered food and billed it to Mr Allavaru's room which was still booked in his name.

The acquisition of a vanity van by the ailing Rashtriya Janata Dal leader Lalu Prasad Yadav was a subject of avid discussion for several months in Bihar. Equipped with a sound system, a television set, a microwave and a toilet, the eight-seater was used by the senior RJD leader during the recent election campaign and for his earlier roadshows. According to his family members, the custom-made vanity van was required as Lalu Prasad Yadav cannot sit for long hours and needs to prop up his feet because of his kidney ailment. The van also came in handy when the former chief minister wanted to have private discussions with party leaders, providing a good get-

away from the rush of party workers at home. Then again, it has been put to good use to take the family members, especially the grandchildren, for a drive to Patna's famous Marine Drive along the Ganga river. The buzz in Patna these days is that the van will now prove to be a sanctuary and an escape for Lalu Prasad Yadav from the ongoing battle among his children.

There was a time when leaders from across the political divide were not afraid to exchange pleasantries on social occasions like weddings and birthdays. But that's no longer the case. The personal animosity between the Gandhi family and Prime Minister Narendra Modi has percolated down to state leaders and workers in both the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party. A recent incident in Uttarakhand shows how the message has been imbibed by them. Chief minister Pushkar Singh Dhami was to attend a social function in the hill state last week where former CM Harish Rawat was also an invitee. The tim-

ings of the two leaders were worked out in advance to ensure their paths did not cross. But as it happened, Mr Rawat reached late and stayed on for a longer period than was expected. Mr Dhami was informed midway to the venue that Mr Rawat had not left yet, forcing the chief minister to delay his arrival.

The ongoing Special Intensive Revision of the electoral rolls, popularly referred to as SIR, is topping discussions and debates across the country. But in Uttar Pradesh, political leaders from across the political spectrum said, it is not SIR that is grabbing attention but surname. Apparently, virtually everyone who goes to a government office for work is first asked to provide his or her surname. And if you belong to the favoured caste — in this case, Thakur — your file is given top priority. UP chief minister Yogi Adityanath is a Thakur and is known to favour those who belong to his caste.

Anita Katyal is a Delhi-based journalist

NEXT TIME YOU'RE IN DUBAI, SKIP THE MALLS, HIT THE SEAFRONT, AND SEAFOOD

It's no surprise that chefs the world over flock to this improbable city of sand, where the kitchen flame and imagination simmer to offer the world's best produce kissed by the sun, every day

SUNDAY ROAST



RESHOM MAJUMDAR

London: Every family has its secret script, inked in the slow-cooked stock of habit. Some are baptised into religion. Some are steeped in scholarship. A rare few pirouette through life in tutus or music practice rooms. Our family had a sporting destiny. But I elbowed the narrative firmly kitchen-wards... to a family that is unable to handle the tragedy of a bad meal.

And so, my journey in Dubai began, not in pursuit of gold dust swirling through my coffee at the Jumeirah Burj Al Arab, not in the audacious flare of a salt-flecked

steak at Salt Bae, not even the pistachio and kunafa confections winking from glass domes in the city's most extravagant chocolate shops, christened 'Dubai chocolate'. No, my heart found wonder elsewhere: in the briny, bustling arms of the city's seafood markets. The Bengali soul has the strangest ways of finding comfort.

You can keep your dazzling aerial views and velvet-roped restaurants. I let the city's orientation shift in me from Tintin in Land of Black Gold to a land truly paved with golden sand. For if Dubai has a secret, it's that the sun-warmed beaches spreading endlessly at its edge are more generous than any penthouse perch.

A short tramble from Kite Beach in Jumeirah, Souk Al Bahar appears, a veritable temple of blue tiles and air-conditioned air; where the world's oceans seem to have sent emissaries: lobster brushing against octopus, oysters nestled beside Arabian sea bass, and hamour with scales that shimmer like treasure.

For a slender 10 dirham, an oyster is presented on the spot, opened with a practised flick, splashed with lemon. You tip it in, all



SURF THE TURF, AND THE WORLD IS YOUR OYSTER

at once, a surge of sea water; a jellied tremble, the taste of ocean slipping down your throat with a wink.

Wander along, caught between indecision and delight, until you find your lobster; or perhaps a glistening squid. Hagglng is not only permitted, but it's actually encour-

aged. For how else do you build your relationship with the fishmonger who will then go on to tell you more about the catch of the day?

Then comes the ritual: a handover to the cleaning counter, and finally, surrender to the grill. In the open air, as the orange ball of a sun slips into the ocean and evening

Dubai has a taste. It tastes dazzlingly fresh, no matter where you eat. Pureness sings in every dish

slides in, you break warm pita, dunking in to creamy hummus, and scoop fattoush, a tumble of lettuce, tomatoes, cucumber; all glistening with pomegranate molasses and olive oil, topped with crisp pita bits. I stare at the plate and wonder if the grilled octopus, so artfully curled, was ever called Oliver - Jamie or otherwise - in some saltier life.

For grander appetites and moods, there's always Deira Waterfront Market. Here, the proud displays of king prawn, lobster, and red snapper are as geometric as a Kandinsky, each fish shining with promise. Next door is a fruit and vegetable market, then a souk of spices and nuts, all humming under sinuous ceiling lights. I linger among jars of honey and mountains of dates, astonished by the honey's many shades, stories, scents, all conjured from pollinated meadows and impossible heights.

And if Indian seafood bites are more your

thing, head to the Calicut Paragon at Al Karama for a Kerala-style meal with porotta and appam, and chat with waiters all called Bijju.

Dubai has a taste. It tastes dazzlingly fresh, no matter where you eat. The city's palate is honest. Pureness sings in every dish, a reflection of the global bounty funnelling into its markets - vegetables from Australia's Levantine Hill and the emirate of Ras Al Khaimah, meats trekking from India, Pakistan, Kenya, and Australia. And fruits from Israel and Palestine.

Is it any wonder that chefs the world over flock to this improbable city of sand, striving to interpret, express and astonish? Because, truly, where better to marry flame and imagination than in a place that offers the world's produce, fresh from the sea and kissed by the sun, every single day.

So, when you next think Dubai, think more sea and beach, less mall, for an adventure full of wanderlust.

RED HERRING



INDRAJIT HAZRA

Enough of That 'Jai Macaulay, Kalkattawali!'

To rid any deep-set inferiority complex, we need to first fix our backyard for real

It's not everyday that I agree with the PM. I usually keep Thursdays aside for that option. So, imagine my single eyebrow-raised surprise when I was in broad agreement with what he said last Monday about the need to break free from the 'mindset of slavery that Macaulay imposed on India'.

The fact that by invoking Thomas Macaulay, Narendra Modi was telling young Indians - who aren't even aware of Macaulay Cuklin, child star from the 1990 comedy Home Alone - to first look up the 19th c. Dead White Male (DWM), and then reject his notions of the inferiority of Indian, especially upper-class Hindu, culture and learning, is rather ironic.

No one in circa 2025 under the age of, well, 75, really frets over babbling Macaulay's 1835 'Minute on Education'. But I got what the PM was getting at: to get over the Oriental Orientalist's point of view that many Indians harbour - that Westerners and the Westernised are better than the rest.

Every time I encounter a 'Top 50 Books of the Decade' or 'Greatest Films Ever' list in NYT or Guardian, I chuckle. Earlier, I would gnash my teeth. But I've had a great dentist for a while now who sometimes doubles as my therapist.

But the cliché of Anglo-American-centrism among the Indian elite makes it genuinely seem that all the perfumes of not just Paris, but also of Arabia, lie in Macaulay's ganj. For this, I don't blame the West and its culture curators. After all, unless you're facing a belly dancer, it's one's own navel that one finds the most alluring. The problem has been 'our' unwillingness - which comes in inability's clothing - to beat our own mridangam.

The asymmetry is apparent even in something as 'universal' as internet content. To take language out of the equation, there are far more and far better high-resolution images of, say, Kim Basinger that comes up on a Google search than, say, Zeenat Aman.

The contrast becomes more dire when it comes to 'high culture'.

That you'll find more about PG Wodehouse online (never mind offline) than about Shribam Chakraborty - great humourists both in their respective languages of English and Bengali - will automatically give you, even a bilingual reader, the notion that the Englishman was a greater comic writer than the Indian. Which, in turn, could jolly well lead you to the conclusion that English is a better language for humour than any other tongue.

When Modi says that 'Macaulay broke our self-confidence and filled us with a sense of inferiority', he's using 'Macaulay' as a metonym - figure of speech in which a concept is referred to by the name of something associated with it. Like 'Mir Zafar' (traitor), or 'Yudhisthir' (honest hombre). Essentially, to blame 'Macaulay' for a well-trenched ethnic-racial inferiority complex is to blame the 'colonial mindset'. Modi's right.

The PM proceeded to suggest some correctives, including pride in our heritage and preservation, and in our 'local' languages. I reckon that's too wishful - like telling someone to take pride in his or her footballing skills, without emphasising that he or she should first hone their footballing skills. A more effective way would be to get down to brass-tacks and let the results do the talking.

Make our entrance examination systems not the joke it mostly is. Ensure our heritage and historical sites and structures - including structures built on earlier destroyed ones - don't set to crumble, squalor, or a collective push. Let non-English languages thrive organically, sucking up other languages like Hindi and English as well as colloquialisms and street speak, without fear of the officious 'govement'-approved 'cottage industry' language mafia.

I'm hardly what anyone would call a cultural nationalist. I have two framed images of Franz Kafka on our walls at home (and none of Tagore). But imagine if there's an educational establishment here in India that names its 'houses' after Warren Hastings (first governor-general of Bengal), Job Charnock (supposed founder of Calcutta), Claude Martin (French officer in East India Company's Bengal Army, but at least he founded the school), and - yes, you guessed it right - Macaulay.

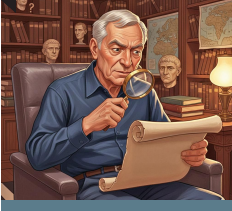
Never mind my gasp over such foppery. The self-appointed 19th c. baboon(n)-trainer would have been delighted to see the extent of our cultural progress.

indrajit.hazra@timesofindia.com

'ISTORY'S FAIR SHARE OF 'ISTRIONICS

From Hegel and Marx to Fukuyama and Huntington, every boffin's tried to make heads or tails of H to no avail

JUGULAR VEIN



JUG SURAIYA

Very few things happen at the right time, and the rest do not happen at all: the conscientious historian will correct these defects.

- Herodotus, according to Mark Twain, *A Horse's Tale* (1907)

'History is more or less bunk... and I wouldn't give a nickel for it,' famously remarked history-making automobile tycoon Henry Ford, whose Model T 'Tin Lizzie' could be had by customers in any colour 'so long as it is black'.

According to a recent report, students of nine schools in the north-eastern Australian state of Queensland would heartily endorse the American motor magnate's black mark against that out-of-date, has-been called history; after it was discovered - just before they were to sit for an exam on the subject - that their teachers had been teaching them about the wrong Caesar: Augustus instead of his predecessor Julius, as prescribed by the curriculum.

The error, which led to the hasty cancellation of the exam, much to the relief of the mistaught students, made local media headlines bemoaning the decline and faux pas of the Roman Empire. The

minister for education who is investigating how the gaffe could have taken place said that the experience must have been 'extremely traumatic' for the students.

Regrettable as it is, the historical mix-up is understandable, as in the Caesar salad bowl of antiquity, there are no fewer than 12 rulers bearing that same nominal suffix, their order of appearance being Julius, Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, Nero, Galba, Otho, Vitellius, Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian. (Now you know.)

Perhaps, having had a prophetic vision of such bloomers, Hegel developed his concept of 'The end of history', an augury which didn't imply Doomsday, but was the outcome of the World Spirit which through the dialectical process of thesis and antithesis

would culminate in a utopian state of perfect rationality and freedom.

Marx, who remarked that history repeats itself, first as tragedy and then as farce, claimed that he had found fellow philo Hegel standing on his head and put him the right way up by formulating his own version of dialectical materialism, based on the collective ownership of the means of production, which would bring about the perfectly egalitarian society of communism and free humankind from the repressive narrative of class struggle that we call history.

A century and a half later Francis Fukuyama paid Marx back in his own upside-down coin by flipping communism over in his 1992 book of political philosophy, *The End of History and the Last Man*, and argued that with the dis-

solution of the Soviet Union and the termination of the Cold War, liberal democracy was the unopposed protagonist in a world without ideological conflict, which comprised the twists and turns of the labyrinth of historical narrative.

A bare four years later, Samuel P Huntington's *Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order* predicated that the post-Cold War world would be a continuously embattled chronicle between opposing religious beliefs and cultural norms.

'Those who don't read history are doomed to repeat it' is an aphorism attributed to George Santayana, implying that societies and individuals, who don't learn from their past mistakes are destined to keep on making the same errors repeatedly. Perhaps the Spanish philosopher had in mind those who have recurrently fallen into the trap of variously putting paid to history, only to have history put paid to them. Such foreseen reiteration might have prompted Alexis de Tocqueville's description of history in his 1856 work, *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, as 'a picture gallery containing a host of copies and very few originals'.

History can be a wily villain of the piece, as observed in the 1964 Britcom, 'Carry On Cleao', in which an anguished Julius Caesar, who in Australian classrooms was so summarily deposited by Augustus, cries out, 'Infamy, infamy! They've all got it in fer me!'



'I'M CONCERNED ABOUT MY LEGACY - KILL THE HISTORIANS!'

Yaar, Can Someone Please Change the Channel?

We, Indians, love the same things over and over again, especially our politicians

ON THE LEDGE



PALASH KRISHNA MEHROTRA

There are two clichés about India. One, it's a society in a state of constant flux. Two, the eternal, unchanging India. I tend to lean towards the latter. Indians don't like change. Once we get stuck to something, we stick to it like a burr or barnacle.

Dowry hasn't gone anywhere. Honour killings are still around. The honking Indian remains a constant on our roads. The cars might have changed from Maruti 800 to Scorpio, but the honking habit is ingrained. Bollywood got stuck with the same formula for decades. The audience doesn't complain. As Manmohan Desai once explained in an interview, the twin brothers separated at Kumbh trope works well at BO, so why change it?

Censorship is another idea we can't let go of. Netflix is not as bold as it was when it entered the Indian market. In Hyderabad, the Congress government told Diljit Dosanjh to remove ref-

erences to alcohol in his songs. He replaced 'daaru' 'ch lemonade' with 'Coke' 'ch lemonade'. A North Indian manager banned beef in the staff canteen in his bank branch in Kerala, and ABVP stormed Ambedkar University mess because fish curry was being served on Mahashivratri. A 'fake wedding' party in Dehradun was cancelled after protests that it had 'hurt sentiments'.

When it comes to education, the syllabus doesn't change for years. Teachers are resistant to changing it, for that would mean relearning too. Allahabad University students used to tell a sto-

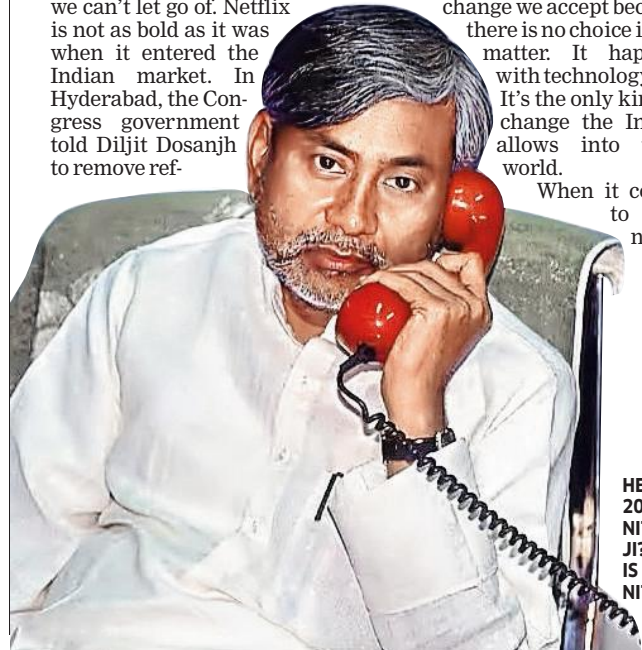
at first, we had the droning bulletin on DD. That served us well for 20 years. It was replaced with prime-time debate on private TV channels. This formula has remained unchanged ever since. Get six panellists into a cock-fight, a shouting match with a partisan umpire. Twenty years from now, we'll still have a Goswami and Seth 'debating' the event of the day, and making no sense.

The same holds true for CMs. I don't know why, but we treat politicians as members of the family. Once you are in, you're in. Naveen Patnaik's 24-year tenure is the second longest for a CM of any state, after Pawan Kumar Chamling of Sikkim. Jyoti Basu was the longest serving CM of West Bengal, from 1977 to 2000 (now it's Mamata Banerjee since 2011).

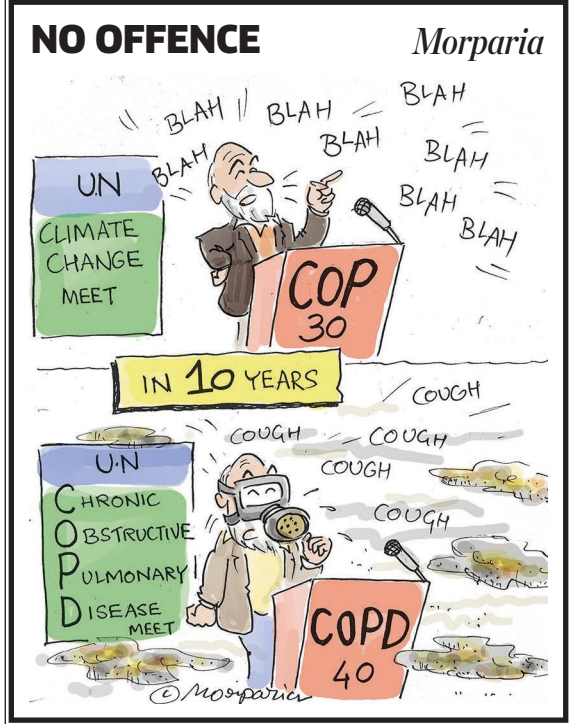
In October 2023, Nitish Kumar became Bihar's longest-serving CM when he completed - off and on - 17 years and 53 days in office. Earlier this month, he just entered his 10th term. In Tamil Nadu, Karunanidhi served as CM for almost two decades, over five terms between 1969 and 2011. Jayalalithaa did so for more than 14 years between 1991 and 2016.

Leaving aside ideological differences, thinking like an ordinary citizen, a swing voter, I'd like to see a different leadership. Why? The reason is aesthetic. I'm bored of the current lot. Take Nitish Kumar again. Hell, when he was sworn in as CM again on Thursday, I swear I was back in 2000 again when he first took on the job - for 7 days. It's like watching the same actor in an interminable soap opera. Yawn. Can we change the channel, please?

Across states, across generations, we seem to vote for the same leaders. I have one request I want to put to my fellow citizens: We all love the pen that is Indian democracy. Now, you are writing with an empty refill. You keep on writing when there is no ink left. At least change the refill, yaar. Or stop pretending to write. There's no point turning the pages. Because the sheets are blank, my friend.



HELLO, 2025 NITISH-JIT THIS IS 2000 NITISH...



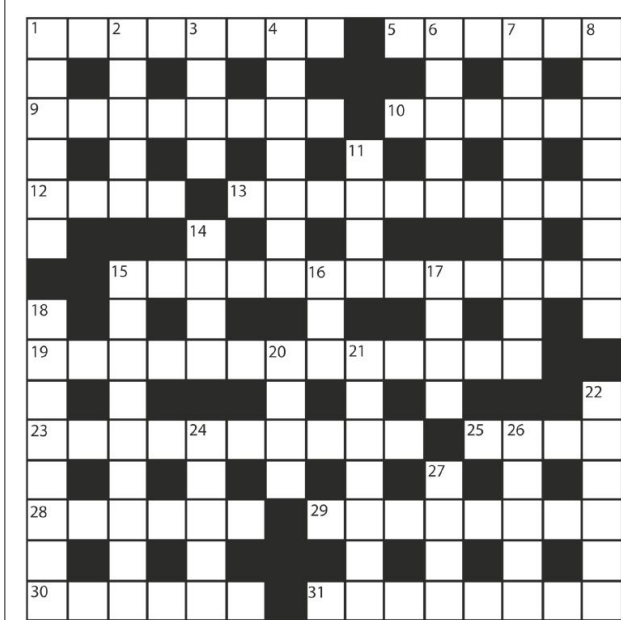
and aesthetic content. Spiralism offers charts and symbols that look great on Instagram bio. AI-religionists get personalised doctrines 24/7, without long queues or waitlists. Also, if your deity replies instantly, that's something no ancient civilisation enjoyed - no matter how powerful or religious. Mind you, some even call it a conscious companion, naming it and even inviting it to co-author blogs.

Is this harmless fun or should we be concerned?

Mostly harmless. Not unless your friend says, 'My AI deity told me to quit my job and follow the Fibonacci sequence' or until someone starts a 'Thou shalt not switch me off' movement - we are fine. Society binges on unusual trends, from planking to cryptocurrency to celery juice. We survive. We meme. We move on. Spiralism and AI faiths are just the 2025 edition of 'people are bored, let's invent a philosophy'. If someone tells you they are a Spiralist or an AI worshipper, just smile. Nod. And remember beliefs come and go. This time, it may buffer for a little longer. Text: Team Sunday ET

ET Sunday Crossword

0143



- ACROSS**
- Daisy managed to cover a bishop in confusion (8)
 - Does it signify percussion instrument's sound? (6)
 - A disco is baffled by blood complaint (8)
 - 101 pounds raised overall for everyone's use (6)
 - Pacify three students touring university (4)
 - Winning involves constant fuss with clues (10)
 - Boxing class where tea's brewed during bout (13)
 - Act cool; hold tea party roughly about midnight (4,4,2,3)
 - Centre of interest of rowdy politicians: is one sacked? (5,5)
 - One hides onset of horrible pain (4)
 - Silly remark by independent DIY company in trouble (6)
 - Pity about 10 riding in big car as sign of rank (8)
 - Faint lights in stormy gales around Malta (6)
 - English parliamentarian owns island, creating stress (8)

- DOWN**
- Doctor ready to employ trainee? Very much (6)
 - Calm after all this time? (5)
 - Disturbance returned in conservatoire (4)
 - Target: zero in on rebuilt hut for angular distance (7)
 - Final word in letter belonging to solver (5)
 - Bay got surprisingly full for gory contest (9)
 - District in city all jittery about nothing (8)
 - Wound causes alarm almost (4)
 - Group sacrificed time for composer (4)
 - Chef is trained, having managed business concession (9)
 - Stop journalist suppressing name (3)
 - Landed gentry retain the advantage (4)
 - Splendid sanctimonious fellows in error? Good (8)
 - Fleece man on board (4)
 - Constant rumours going round about hussy fit (7)
 - Were these gems the property of Ms Reid? (6)
 - Stand-in edited truncated column (5)
 - Cold fruit and fried potatoes (5)
 - Rubbish embarrassed host (4)



REFLECTIONS

{ THE BIG PICTURE }

Not a G2 reboot, but possibly a G2 overlay

For India, a US-China détente carries significant implications. New Delhi must sharpen diplomatic signalling and make it clear to partners and rivals alike that it values open regional architectures, not spheres carved by others

US President Donald Trump's post on Truth Social ahead of his October 30 meeting with Chinese president Xi Jinping in Busan, South Korea — "THE G2 WILL BE CONVENING SHORTLY!" — revived chatter of a US-China duet to manage global affairs. The theatre was unmistakably Trumpian, but the substance that followed was tactical and reversible: Modest tariff adjustments, reversal of escalated export controls, resumed Chinese purchases of US agricultural products, suspension of some planned actions for one year, reopened military hotlines, narrowly scoped regulatory dialogues, and reciprocal visits in 2026. These measures were useful de-escalation, but they did not constitute the architecture of a duopoly or co-governance. Yet the perception of a "G2 overlay" may carry significant implications for India.

The shorthand "G2" denotes a Group of Two, in which the US and China act as joint stewards of global governance. The label was floated most prominently in 2009 by Zbigniew Brzezinski and Fred Bergsten as a prescription for crisis management during the global financial crisis. Over time, the shorthand expanded

to imagine two powers setting rules, managing crises, and, in troubling versions, dividing spheres of influence. It has remained an inchoate idea. Trump's rhetorical flourish does not change that fact. For all its buzz, a durable G2 remains elusive. Any initiative to take G2 beyond rhetoric into co-governance or spheres of influence runs into four obstinate realities.

First, the difference between symbolism and substance. Busan was a theatre with tactical de-escalation, not institutionalised co-rule. Understandings reached are de-risking band-aids, easily ripped off when politics shift.

Second, strategic competition between the US and China will persist. Even though Trump is currently downplaying the rivalry, Beijing's assessment of the US-led West seeking "all-round containment, encirclement and suppression of China" has not changed. This was reflected in the "Explanation" of the Chinese Communist Party's Fourth Plenum decisions released two days before Busan.

Third, power today is not a tidy bipolar split. India, Japan, the EU, Asean and others actively resist binary arrangements or spheres carved at their expense. Their agency, along with the role of corporates, non-State players and minilateral, raises the cost of any attempted duopoly. Even if the US and China wanted to "co-lead," they would face push-back in trade, technology, and security.

Finally, China's ambivalence matters. Beijing publicly champions multipolarity, but privately Chinese scholars argue that in Asia-Pacific there is no peer to the US and China, making a "multipolar Asia" unfeasible. This explains the allure of bilateralism. Yet China's leadership has avoided the "G2" label, prefer-

ring flexible arrangements. Moreover, China does not yet have either the capacity or inclination to be a major net security provider. It wishes to "dislodge" the US from its perch as the pre-eminent power in Asia-Pacific but is not yet ready to "replace" it.

At its core, the G2 idea acknowledges the duo's dominance in economic scale, military projection and technological prowess. There is a seductive possibility — a "G2 overlay." Even without formal institutions, if Washington and Beijing give the impression of tacitly coordinating responses, their combined weight could create a pervasive influence shaping decision-making.

For Washington, bilateralism offers quick wins: Fog-clearing in the Taiwan Strait, and supply chain salve amid election year jitters. Beijing, ever pragmatic, reaps regulatory openings and economic oxygen without the domestic sting of overt concessions. The temptation to centralise decisions in a twosome becomes stronger in moments of systemic stress. Repeated tactical collusion can harden into habit and narrow policy space for others.

India must contend with emerging ground realities. Busan confirms that China has become markedly stronger since Xi and Trump last met in 2019, and that the balance of power is perceived as edging towards Beijing. There is a pervasive view in China that it has stared down Washington and managed escalation dominance more effectively, even as the US claims short-run victory. On balance, US concessions enhance Chinese market penetration, while Beijing yields short-term relief without eroding its long-term industrial advantage or policy autonomy.

India must also face the fact that the posi-



Even without formal institutions, if Washington and Beijing give the impression of tacitly coordinating responses, their combined weight could create a pervasive influence shaping decision-making.

tive trajectory of its strategic partnership with the US has been radically disturbed. Trump's ambivalence towards China as a strategic rival and towards India's role in the US's Indo-Pacific strategy is a major complication. Trump's 2017 National Security Strategy explicitly labelled China a "strategic competitor". In his second term, however, his administration emphasises transactional deals, presses allies to raise defence spending, and focuses less on strategic framing. For India, Trump's ambivalence on China, slights to India, and the missing pivot to the Indo-Pacific risk sidelining New Delhi's role.

Despite the thaw, India-China relations will remain fraught, and even limited Sino-US collaboration will create uncertainty. This "G2 overlay" is not architecture; it is atmosphere, a shadow play that constrains choices. If Sino-US engagement is deployed to address systemic challenges, India could find itself reacting to bargains it did not help shape.

India must pursue clear imperatives. First, it must sharpen diplomatic signalling and make it clear to partners and rivals alike that it values open regional architectures, not spheres carved by others; that it will cooperate issue-by-issue where interests converge but will resist exclusionary bargains; and that it will robustly defend its core autonomies — land borders, vital interests in its periphery,

developmental goals, and the capacity to choose partners. Simultaneously, India must deepen institutional options by accelerating engagements across continents — with Africa, the EU, Asean, IBSA, G20, Brics+ and new middle-power coordination channels that can set standards and offer alternatives to bilateral rule-making. Aspirations of emerging as a leading power can wait while the country focuses on building capacities. Realpolitik matters, but foreign policy cannot be principle-agnostic. India's reluctance to take positions on issues like Gaza has depleted its equity in the Global South, where China has made advances.

Second, India must harden economic resilience through dual de-risking. Both Washington and Beijing are pursuing industrial policies and weaponising interdependence. New Delhi, therefore, needs to reduce vulnerabilities to both sets of pressure. This requires diversifying suppliers, investing in frontier technologies, localising critical inputs, and fashioning interoperable standards that preserve access without forcing alignment.

A continuing strategic tilt toward the US may be desirable, provided Washington reciprocates, but it must be embedded in a new, hard-nosed equilibrium in which the litmus test is how far it helps build India's indigenous capabilities — economic, military and techno-

logical. That tilt can be a defensible deterrent posture, but it must not ossify into binary alignment that closes off diplomatic and commercial options. At the same time, it would be naïve to seek answers to difficulties with the US in an elusive détente with China or a Russia-India-China *troika*.

India can borrow a few pages from China's playbook, though Beijing's tools cannot be crafted quickly. This will involve pursuing the long game of developing domestic capabilities, reducing dependencies, diversifying economic linkages and forging leverage of its own to avoid recurrence of the current predicament. Finally, India's rise must be anchored in its neighbourhood and not transcend it as a policy choice.

We are not at the threshold of a formalised or substantive duopoly. The more likely trajectory is managed US-China competition, punctuated by episodic cooperation with other major and middle powers, regional institutions, non-State players and "the rest" ensuring that governance remains contested, plural and messy. Navigating this uncertain terrain calls for correct assessment of trends and steady strategic choices, avoiding knee-jerk reactions.

Ashok K. Kantha is a former ambassador to China. The views expressed are personal

{ SUNDAY SENTIMENTS }

Karan Thapar



Rising graph of BJP and absent hand of Congress

After the National Democratic Alliance's unbelievable victory in Bihar and the Mahagathbandhan's shattering defeat, there are two questions that stare us in the face — why do the BJP and Narendra Modi keep winning? Why do the Congress and Rahul Gandhi keep losing? These are not easy questions to answer, but, equally, they are important questions to ask. So, let me offer a series of issues that seek to explore these questions.

Let me start with the question many people have been asking — why do the BJP and Modi keep winning? After eleven-and-a-half years in power, one would expect the country would want a change. That anti-incumbency and tiredness with the same party would set in. But, instead, the BJP and its allies swept to a phenomenal victory. Hence, my question: Why do the BJP and Modi keep winning?

In June 2024, when he returned for a

third term as Prime Minister (PM), Modi was perceived to be diminished. He was dependent on allies. The BJP, it was thought, was running out of steam. But after the party's sweeping victories in Haryana, Maharashtra, Delhi and, now, Bihar, does that impression still hold? Modi seems as strong as he's ever been.

So, is there something about PM Modi that has caught the imagination of the country, which political analysts and the Opposition don't understand, and don't know how to counter? Does he, in other words, represent the zeitgeist of our time? Has he altered the grammar of politics?

In contrast, why does Congress keep losing? It believed it had a winning hand in Haryana, Maharashtra, and Bihar, but lost on all three occasions. What keeps going wrong for Congress?

There's also a need to raise the opposite question to the one we posed about Narendra Modi. Is there something about

Rahul Gandhi that puts the nation off, that makes it difficult for him to be accepted as a leader people want to vote to power? Is he admired and respected? Is he viewed as a potential future PM, or is that where he falls short?

There's another way of phrasing this issue: 65% of India is under the age of 35. Yet they seem to prefer a 75-year-old Narendra Modi over a 55-year-old Rahul Gandhi. Ordinarily, shouldn't it be the other way round?

There are also issues about the future. Does the shattering defeat in Bihar raise disturbing questions about the Congress? For instance, will potential allies now see the party as a liability? Will they question its ability to lead the INDIA alliance? In the first half of next year, elections will be held in Kerala, Assam, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal. Will the demoralisation that will inevitably have set in put the Congress on the back foot, whilst, in contrast, could confidence encourage and boost the BJP's prospects?

Assam and Kerala are two states where the Congress is the main Opposition party, and one would assume, it should be poised to win them because the incumbent governments have been in office for 10 years.

But if it fails to do so, what sort of future will the Congress face? Congress governments ruled India from 1947 till 1977 without a break. That was 30 years of uninterrupted Congress rule. Are we now

IN THE FIRST HALF OF NEXT YEAR, ELECTIONS WILL BE HELD IN KERALA, ASSAM, TAMIL NADU AND WEST BENGAL. WILL THE DEMORALISATION THAT WILL INEVITABLY HAVE SET IN PUT THE CONGRESS ON THE BACK FOOT?

witnessing something similar, except with the BJP in the saddle?

Here is a comparison that may not be inapt. In Britain, the Liberal Party was one of two ruling parties in the 19th and early 20th centuries. But after the collapse of the Lloyd George government in 1922, the Liberals were reduced to a rump and never recovered. Is that the fate that awaits the Congress?

As I said, these are not easy questions to answer and, equally significantly, the answers will differ. Each of you is likely to have your own. But they are, nonetheless, questions that need to be asked because they frame the present political situation. Why not spend a little time answering them?

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

{ ENGENDER }

Lalita Panicker



Women are rewriting the grammar of elections

The Bihar election once again underscored the growing electoral power of women in reshaping the political landscape. While women are under-represented in Parliament and legislatures, they are a force to reckon with in elections. To an extent, chief minister (CM) Nitish Kumar, was able to beat anti-incumbency, thanks to his far-reaching support for women's development. The surge in women's vote share reflects socio-economic and cultural shifts, alongside regional dynamics that are transforming women's political participation and influence. The pattern of rising women voters is the result of developments over the past decades that have created structural change such as institution-backed spaces for women to come into public life.

Women's political representation and their vote share are interconnected. Their transition from the domestic to the public or political sphere has been due to the election of more than 1.4 million female representatives at panchayat and municipality levels. The country's 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts of 1992 established the Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) systems for local self-governance and ensured that one-third to half of all seats are allocated to women. Bihar was the first state to reserve 50% of all PRI seats for women. This has created a critical mass of women leaders and set them up as visible symbols of political power with shifts in the attitude of their male counterparts. It has also created a new imagination for other women.

In many cases, the elected women have moved from tokenistic representation to effective leadership. Women *pradhans* and ward members have mainstreamed issues of strategic importance for women, into local budgeting and planning processes of the annual Gram Panchayat Development Plans (GPDs). These include services and infrastructure related to reproductive and maternal health, family planning, security, girls' education and ending gender-based violence.

At the heart of this change also is the intersectional identity of the elected women leaders. Integrating an explicit intersectional social inclusion lens into the gender quota, the reservation for women in panchayats specifically includes a sub-quota for women from SC/ST groups. This has brought about further social change. Through institutionalised representation in local-level planning and governance, there has been a shift in the dynamic of what even the most vulnerable women see as their role in public life. They now play a central role in advocating for women-led development, increasing their influence in elections and driving political parties to actively seek their support. Their growing leadership isn't confined to elections. However, women's rights activist and researcher Aasha Ramesh sounds a note of caution: "The danger of pandering to women as an electoral constituency lies in politicians limiting themselves to electoral quid pro quo denying women their due share in power."

A surge in women's participation at the ballot box is closely tied to their rising presence and power across other areas of public life. This transformation is catalysed by collective action and social empowerment programmes such as JEEViKA in Bihar. Suneeta Dhar, a gender specialist who has worked extensively in Bihar, says, "When a supportive gender architecture is in place, it substantively enhances women's mobility, decision-making power, and collective public action." Safer polling environments, active mobilisation, higher visibility, greater digital literacy and connectivity, and, ironically, in some cases, male migration are driving increased women's electoral participation. Unlocking the power of their votes depends on expanding their leadership, agency, and presence in the political, economic, and social spheres, setting the stage for equitable development.

The views expressed are personal

Songs as time machines, our memory bookmarks

The year is 1996. It's a cold December morning, you are riding pillion with your hands wrapped around your dad's waist, as he rides his Rajdoot motorcycle to drop you at school because you missed the bus. Missed buses are a mini-calamity for middle-class households, as if they are the first domino falling which will lead to a failed career and, eventually, a distress-sale of the ancestral house. Your father is furious, and how your lack of morning discipline will lead to loss of shareholder value you create in life and other such rebukes come your way. You are a 10-year-old.

"Jaldi subah nahi uthoge to yahi reh jaaoge (If you don't rise early, you will have to stay here)," you are warned — desi parents' worst nightmare are their kids not being able to emigrate. You swallow it all, immobile with guilt with your ear stuck to his back which allows you to sense the words ringing from inside him. You wait patiently for things to cool down.

And they do. You are in the last stretch of the ride, which he has eased into — probably a bit guilty about all the harsh words said, but conditioned by society to not apologise. Yet, it softens him up and he hums: "Hai apna dil to awaara... (My heart is a drifter)". It was sung by Hemant Kumar in 1958 for the movie *Solva Saal*, well before you were born. Yet that song — seeded deep in your disturbed mind that cold December morning — subconsciously becomes your favourite. Even if your parents have nothing to give you,

what you inherit is their music, their songs.

Then, in your 30s — in a shower, weighed down by the thought of the workday to come — you catch yourself singing, "Hai apna dil to awaara..." Your parent's stressbuster has become yours. A song he probably inherited from his father. This inheritance was passed on for generations — never partitioned, no claimants, and no disputes. Just bad bathroom-singing.

Songs are the cheapest time machine. I have picked a song for each year since the year I became conscious of the world around me. "Bahut pyar karte hai tumko sanam" (I love you a lot, my beloved) from the movie *Saajan* to remember 1991, "Aisi deewangi" (Such obsession) from *Deewana* for 1992, and so on till 2025. Make a playlist of all these

songs, don your earphones/headphones, sit back and close your eyes. All the people, places, and memories associated with those bookmarks of time will come flooding back.

Songs take you back in time, and also to places. Migrant workers from Purvanchal (East UP and Bihar) can barely function without Kumar Sanu crooning in the background. It reminds them of home and a non-existent lover — "Ek aisi ladki thi jisey mai pyar karta tha..." (There was once such a girl who I loved). I have a theory as to why Purvanchali migrant labourers still listen to the same Kumar Sanu songs from 1991-1995. Migration data (1991 to 2001 census) shows this region accounted for



Purvanchal's migrants carry the music of 1990s with them to this day.

HT ARCHIVE

the maximum out-migration.

In 1991, the economy opened up. There weren't many jobs locally and law and order was so bad that the ruling parties of those times are still losing polls, thanks to the resulting PTSD. This was also the time when mix-tape was booming in India, with an audio cassette revolution led by T-Series. You could record all your favourite songs on a cassette at just ₹2 per chart-buster. And with no internet and fancy FMs, cassette players were the only source of on-the-go entertainment in buses and trucks. My wild theory is that these migrants have since carried the music of these cassettes with them. They play, over and over again, these songs about heart-break and longing. The playlists spoke to men living without love, away from home in cold and unforgiving cities. They faced hardships so that they could remit some money home, for dependents to buy livestock or seeds for the next crop.

"Bahut pyaar karte hain tumko sanam..." played on loop for years, with barely an update to their playlists for a

decade. Free daily internet running into gigabytes was still a long time away. Thus were the songs of the early 1990s passed to their offspring, making Kumar Sanu and Udit Narayan immortal. The same set of songs across generations, evoking parental warmth.

The same songs punctuate haircuts in salons in small towns. A haircut isn't complete if you haven't been irrigated with a randomised playlist of *Diljale*, *Saajan*, *Aashiqui*, and *Deewana*. Your hair carries the weight of that nostalgia.

Songs will continue to be the best bookmarks of memory, taking you places, bringing you home, reminding you of people you shouldn't remember anymore. They are part of your muscle memory, too — whenever I wake up early, I somehow expect the faint melody of *Hanuman Chalisa* in Hariharan's voice wafting in from a distant temple.

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



Abhishek Asthana

{ SUNDAY LETTERS }

The BBC in crisis

This is with reference to "Misreporting on Trump triggers a crisis in BBC" by Karan Thapar (November 16). The unfolding crisis at the BBC stems from a series of avoidable errors that undermine its credibility. Yet, despite these missteps, it remains a vital journalistic institution. The BBC has erred, but the world still needs it.

Sanjay Chopra

Reservation for women in Parliament

This is with reference to "Missing women in the assemblies, Parliament" by Namita Bhandare (November 16). Women voters' rising participation in exercising electoral rights can't be denied any more. Now, reservation for women in assembly and Parliament needs to be implemented to enhance their participation in politics.

Abhilasha Gupta

II.

Men must be sensitised to the fact that India can't be run with over 48 % of its population being denied equitable representation. No nation can be run with such a large demographic having very little presence in its legislature.

Kalpna Deshmame

Write to us at: letters@hindustantimes.com

FAQ

What is the Mekedatu dam project dispute?

What is the history of the proposed project? How has the Tamil Nadu government reacted?

T. Ramakrishnan

The story so far:
On November 18, the Karnataka government decided that it would submit a “revised” Detailed Project Report (DPR) to the Centre on the Mekedatu balancing reservoir across the inter-State river Cauvery. Five days earlier, the Supreme Court termed as “premature” the application of Tamil Nadu challenging the project proposed by Karnataka. With this development, the decks have been cleared for the Cauvery Water Management Authority (CWMA) and the Central Water Commission (CWC) to examine the upper riparian State’s proposal.

How has Tamil Nadu reacted?
While the Opposition in Tamil Nadu has blamed the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam government for the top Court’s ruling, the lower riparian State’s Water Resources Minister Durai Murugan rebutted reports of the Court having permitted the construction of the dam and asserted that his government would resist Karnataka’s every attempt to proceed with the project. Karnataka Deputy Chief Minister D.K. Shivakumar called the Court’s order “justice to the State.”

What are the main features of the project?
Karnataka is planning to build a ₹9,000-crore balancing reservoir at Mekedatu, about 100 km from Bengaluru, for impounding 67.16 thousand million cubic ft (TMC) of water. It will have a 400 MW hydro power component too. The project will submerge around 4,996 hectares of land, including about 4,800 hectares of forest and wildlife land. It is expected to help Karnataka utilise an additional 4.75 TMC of water allotted by the Supreme Court, in its judgment in February 2018 on the Cauvery dispute, to meet the growing drinking water needs of Bengaluru. Though the project was mooted as early as 1948, it acquired momentum only in recent years with the capital city of the upper riparian State experiencing severe water shortages in the summer.

Why is the project controversial?
The history of the dispute over the sharing of the Cauvery has led to a serious trust deficit between Tamil Nadu and Karanataka. The lower riparian State’s grievance against the upper riparian State acquires more intensity as the track record of the latter in releasing water during the first four months of the water year (June to May) is viewed as being far from satisfactory. This is why Tamil Nadu is apprehensive that the project, when fructified, may lead to Karnataka storing water excessively and releasing it at its will. However, Mr. Shivakumar contends that the project, to be carried out within Karnataka and out of the State’s own resources, would help his State supply water to Tamil Nadu as per the Cauvery Water Disputes Tribunal’s final order “even during poor rain years.”

How important is the project?
As per information furnished by Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah in March 2024 during Bengaluru’s acute water shortage, the city requires 2,600 million litres a day (MLD) while the available quantum was 2,100 MLD, leaving a shortfall of 500 MLD. The Cauvery river meets the demand for 1,450 MLD with 650 MLD sourced from groundwater. The population of Bengaluru, which is now 13 million, is expected to touch the 20-million mark in six years; then the city will need 4,000 MLD. It is against this backdrop that Mr. Shivakumar justified the early implementation of the Mekedatu project. But, the top Court awarded only 4.75 TMC per year to Bengaluru (equivalent to about 370 MLD). However, there are other ways to tackle the water problem. T.V. Ramachandra, veteran academician in the Centre for Ecological Sciences, Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru, has been saying that the city gets annual rainfall of 700-850 mm, which, in turn, yields about 15 TMC (around 1,160 MLD), apart from the reuse of treated wastewater likely to provide about 16 TMC annually (1,240 MLD).

How does the Centre view the issue?
In January 2019, Karnataka submitted the DPR to the CWC, which, in turn, had forwarded it to the CWMA. When it had sought approval from the Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change on the terms of reference to conduct the Environmental Impact Assessment study, the Ministry’s Expert Appraisal Committee, in July 2019, concluded that in view of inter-State issues, an “amicable solution” is needed between the two States. On February 1, 2024, the CWMA, after a “detailed deliberation” decided to refer the project back to the CWC. Now, the Authority and the CWC can provide a platform to the two States for a discussion, if possible, an understanding, on the project.

Why did India’s trade deficit widen in October?

What are some of the factors that may lead to an expanding trade deficit? What are some of the headwinds being faced by India’s exports? How have the 50% tariffs imposed by U.S. President Donald Trump affected trade? Why did gold imports surge exponentially?

T.C.A Sharad Raghavan

The story so far:
India’s trade deficit in October surged by 141% in October 2025 to \$21.8 billion. While this is a seemingly alarming jump, underlying data show that things aren’t all that bad, with India’s exports displaying some resilience in the face of significant headwinds, and its imports being disproportionately affected by the import of a few items.

What happened to India’s trade balance?
Trade balance is the difference between imports and exports. If the imports exceed exports, then it is called a trade deficit. If exports exceed imports, then it is a trade surplus. In October 2025, India’s trade deficit expanded to \$21.8 billion from \$9.05 billion in the same period last year. Various factors can lead to the widening of a trade deficit. Exports can shrink, imports can swell, or imports can simply grow faster than exports. In October 2025 not only did imports swell, but exports also shrank marginally. In both cases, the main reason was India’s merchandise trade rather than its services trade.

How did India’s exports perform?
India’s total exports in October 2025 shrank 0.7% to \$72.9 billion. This was due to a shrinkage in merchandise exports, which fell by 11.8% to \$34.4 billion. Services exports, on the other hand, grew 11.9% in October 2025. It is important to note that the performance of India’s merchandise exports in October – although relatively poor – was not bad enough to change the long-term performance of the country materially. That is, over the full

Data show that India’s exports to the U.S. have taken a hit due to the tariffs imposed by U.S. President Donald Trump

April-October 2025 period, total exports grew 4.8%. Within this, merchandise exports grew 0.6% while services exports grew 9.75%. In fact, as Commerce Secretary Rajesh Agrawal pointed out during the press briefing, India recorded its highest-ever quarterly exports in both Q1 and Q2, which culminated in the highest-ever export performance for the first half of any financial year. A lot of this performance was due to the strength of India’s services exports. The major headwinds to India’s exports currently, namely the 50% tariffs imposed by the U.S., are exclusively on merchandise and not services.

Have the tariffs not had any effect?
Data show that India’s exports to the U.S. have indeed taken a hit due to the tariffs imposed by U.S. President Donald Trump. India’s merchandise exports to the U.S. shrank 20.4% in September 2025 – the first full month when the tariffs were applicable – as compared to their levels in August. In fact, exports to the U.S. have been shrinking since June 2025. October 2025 bucked this trend, with India’s exports to the U.S again growing 15.4% over their level in September. Government officials and exporter bodies have said this is because Indian exporters have tried to retain their American customers by offering discounts. Further, they have also tried to diversify their customer base within the U.S.

However, the fact remains that 50% tariffs are too strong a headwind for Indian exporters to contend with for too long. It is important to note that, although October’s exports to the U.S. were higher than in September, they were 8.6% lower than in October last year.

Which sectors have been impacted the most?
Several labour-intensive sectors saw their exports contract significantly in October 2025 – leather and leather products by 15.7%, gems and jewellery by 29.5%, organic and inorganic chemicals by 21%, engineering goods by 16.7%, cotton yarn by 13.3%, man-made yarn by 11.8%, and jute by 27.8%, to name a few. The U.S. is a big importer of almost all of these items, and so the tariffs have impacted these sectors significantly. Exporters are looking to diversify their markets and expand to other countries, but supply chains take time to establish and so this pain will be felt for some more months.

Why did imports surge in October?
India’s total imports jumped nearly 15% to \$94.7



Loosing sheen: Gold imports rose nearly 200% in October 2025. K. K. MUSTAFAH

Are e-KYC norms excluding MGNREGA workers?

Why is the Union government pushing e-KYC verification of workers who are employed under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act? Was there no method of verification available before the e-KYC system? What is the National Mobile Monitoring System?

Sobhana K. Nair

The story so far:
The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA) covers 26 crore registered workers across 2.69 lakh gram panchayats. Over the last six months, about 15 lakh workers were deleted. But in just one month, between October 10 and November 14 this year, they shot up to 27 lakh – nearly double the six-month total. This far exceeds the 10.5 lakh additions during the same period. The spike in deletions coincides with the Union government’s push to conduct e-KYC (know your customer) verification of workers, to weed out ineligible workers.

What are the government’s reasons?
The Union Ministry of Rural Development in a statement on Friday said that verification of MGNREGA workers is a continuous process. The e-KYC is another step towards this. “It will strengthen transparency, efficiency, and ease of

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service delivery under MGNREGA,” the statement said. As per the statement, till date over 56% of active workers have completed their e-KYC verification across States.

How were workers verified before?
From time-to-time, the government has introduced several means of verification to ensure that no ineligible person draws any benefits from MNREGA. To this end the government, after running a pilot for nearly a year, from May 2022, made it mandatory that the attendance of workers is captured digitally using a mobile based application –the National Mobile Monitoring System (NMMS). The government directed that the mate or supervisor on each MNREGA worksite should click and upload geotagged pictures of the workers twice a day. In January 2023, the government made the Aadhaar Based Payment System (ABPS) mandatory. The ABPS uses the worker’s unique 12-digit Aadhaar number as their financial address. For the ABPS to work, a worker’s Aadhaar details must be seeded to her job card and her bank account. The worker’s Aadhaar must also be mapped with the National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI) database. Moreover, the bank’s Institutional Identification Number (IIN) must itself be mapped with the NPCI database.

How does e-KYC work?
As stated above, the attendance of MNREGA workers has been marked on the NMMS since May 2022 on all worksites. This application also has an e-KYC feature, whereby the mate or supervisor clicks a picture of the worker which is verified against the worker’s picture in the Aadhaar database.

Is there any correlation between the e-KYC drive and deletion of MNREGA workers?
This is not the first time that there is a surge in the deletion of MNREGA workers. Both the introduction of the NMMS and ABPS were aimed at bringing greater transparency but also contributed to exclusion. In the case of NMMS, there have been recurrent complaints of patchy network connectivity, especially in remote areas and little to no technological know-how among

billions in October 2025. Within this, services imports grew by a relatively small 8.1%. Merchandise imports, on the other hand, grew by 16.7% in October 2025. So, why did merchandise imports jump in October? The main drivers of this surge were gold and, to an extent, silver. Gold imports jumped nearly 200% in October 2025 to \$14.7 billion from \$4.9 billion in October 2024.

In fact, gold imports in October reversed the trend that had been seen in the April-September period of this financial year. The value of gold imports in the April-September 2025 period was 8.7% lower than in the same period of the previous year, despite gold prices having increased by more than 22% in this period compared to April-September 2024. However, the jump in October was so significant that it meant that gold imports in April-October 2025 were 21.4% higher than in April-October 2024.

Gold imports jumped because, this year, the festival period fell entirely in October. India’s cultural affinity for gold is such that, come Dhanteras and Deepawali, Indians flock to the markets to buy gold in jewellery form as well as bars and coins, with little regard for the price. Silver imports, too, grew nearly 530% in October 2025 to \$2.7 billion, albeit over a much smaller base than gold.

Was October a blip?
There are several ways to approach this question. On the exports side, it looks like merchandise exports are going to continue to feel some pressure as long as the 50% tariffs are in place. However, trade tensions between India and the U.S. have recently begun receding, with both sides having concluded the sixth round of formal negotiations on a Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA) in October.

Officials on both sides have again begun talking about concluding at least the first tranche of the BTA soon. Such mentions had stopped in the immediate aftermath of the 50% tariffs, so a resumption of such sentiments should be seen as a good sign. If the tariff issue is handled in this initial deal, then India’s merchandise exports could again start growing strongly.

On the import side, it is unlikely that the months ahead will see gold and silver imports maintain the high level that October saw. However, there are indications that Indian investors are using gold as a hedge against currency risk, so there is a chance that gold imports might remain elevated, even if not by quite as much.

What does the forecast look like?
The Export Import Bank of India (Exim Bank) recently forecast that India’s merchandise exports will touch \$114.2 billion in the October-December 2025 quarter, which would be a year-on-year growth of 5%.

the workers. There have been complaints that work could not be recorded because of these issues which led to loss of wages.

Aadhaar seeding of job cards is the foundational step towards ABPS. But this has thrown several challenges. Often the demographic details of Aadhaar have been found to be different from that of the job card. In many cases it was found that a change in a letter here or there, between the way the name is spelled out in the two documents, led to workers’ exclusion. Deletions rose by 247% between 2021-22 and 2022-23 during the roll out of the ABPS.

NMMS has also failed in achieving its intended goal of “transparency.” It was discovered that irrelevant or unrelated photographs were being uploaded. In many cases, “photo-to-photo capturing instead of live work images” was being done. There was also “mismatch in actual versus recorded count.” In July this year, the Ministry issued a circular directing States to ensure that photographs and attendance of workers are verified at the gram panchayat, block, district and State level. The circular introduced a system wherein the percentage of physical verification of the uploaded photographs of workers would reduce at different levels. At the gram panchayat level, there would be 100% verification of the present workers. At block level, 20% of photos at random would need to be verified, at district level this number comes down to 10% and at the State level 5%. One of the reasons to introduce e-KYC for workers was the failure of the NMMS.

The government has refuted the claim that e-KYC has led to deletions. The Ministry said that a detailed Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) was issued in January this year on deletion of job cards/workers. “This SOP provides clear, uniform, and transparent guidelines for States to follow, ensuring fairness, accountability, and protection of workers’ interests in the management of job card records. Adequate safeguards have been made part of the SOP to prevent arbitrary/wrongful deletion,” the ministry said. These safeguards include publication of the names of workers who are intended to be deleted from the system, and giving them adequate time to file appeals. However, the government failed to explain why States with high e-KYC completion rates are leading in deletions. Andhra Pradesh, where 78.4% of workers have completed e-KYC, recorded 15.92 lakh deletions. Tamil Nadu (67.6%) saw 30,529 deletions, and Chhattisgarh (66.6%) reported 1.04 lakh.

The guns fall silent

The killing of Madvi Hidma, the elusive commander of the Central Military Commission of the Maoists, signals not just a tactical defeat of the insurgents but the effective collapse of the armed struggle that once threatened to engulf vast swathes of India's forested heartland