

AGENDA



NAXALISM ENDGAME

The Government's assertion that Naxalism has been 'more or less wiped out' from Bastar marks a watershed in India's long and arduous struggle against the insurgency. Yet, the challenge ahead is no less significant: to secure a lasting victory by winning the ideological battle, preventing any resurgence, addressing the underlying roots of injustice, and transforming former conflict zones through sustained governance and inclusive development

Defeating Naxalism: How the red corridor was reclaimed

While the nation heaved a sigh of relief on March 30 when the Union Home Minister Amit Shah proclaimed in the Lok Sabha that "Naxalism has been more or less wiped out from Bastar" the security forces continued to scour the forests in Left Wing Extremism-affected States for the remaining Maoists who chose to cling to their path of violence. The following day, 35 Maoists surrendered in five districts of Chhattisgarh, prompting the Chief Minister Vishnu Deo Sai to declare that the state was free of Naxalism. Nine others crossed over to Gadchiroli (Maharashtra) and surrendered before the police there. A significant achievement to gloat over.

The relentless pursuit of Maoists by the commands of the elite Cobra Battalions, the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), Chhattisgarh police, the District Reserve Guards (DRG), Bastar Fighters of

Chhattisgarh police and Battalions of the Central Armed Police Force (CAPF) viz, the Border Security Force, Indo Tibetan Border Police, Sashastra Seema Bal apart from the CRPF during the last few years displaced them from their hitherto safe sanctuaries in Abhujmad forests. Heavy casualties suf-

fered by the Maoists in encounters, arrest of many and large scale surrenders drastically reduced their strength from over 4,000 armed cadres to just a handful of them. In the past three years, 706 Maoists were killed, 2,218 arrested and nearly 5000 surrendered.

CAPF Battalions had to pay a heavy price in the initial years of deployment due to lack of robust intelligence set up and lack of road connectivity in the interiors. Maoists would gather in hordes of hundreds to ambush and attack security personnel without their getting a whiff of it. Movement of vehicles on unmetalled roads proved disastrous as they were blown up by Improvised Explosive Devices (IED) resulting in heavy casualties.

Despite stiff resistance by Maoists who threatened contractors and the labourers, the construction of roads were taken up in the right earnest under the security cover of CRPF. Efforts made in 2017 to construct



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the roads resulted in the martyrdom of nearly 40 CRPF personnel who were securing the under-construction roads. The Maoists had the alacrity to bury IEDs deep in the soil before the roads were macadamised and trigger them at their will when vehicles pass over them to inflict heavy casualties on the security forces.

The construction of over 12,000 kilometres of roads facilitated the movement of vehicles in the interiors. As many as 406 CAPF camps were established in the Maoist bastion, forcing them out of their sanctuaries. The visibility of governance by the state infused confidence and fearlessness among the villagers dotting the mountainous forests. The Maoist intelligence network was dismantled and replaced by the state intelligence apparatus. Information regarding the Maoists began to flow. With the backup of hard intelligence, operations were launched, and their hideouts raided, resulting in heavy casualties

to Maoists. It was the surprise element that caught them unawares. Though guarded by over 26 Maoists, Basvaraju, the general secretary, was killed along with all his guards by the DRG on May 21 last year in Narayanpur, which had an immense demoralising effect on the cadres.

The raising of DRG by recruiting a good number of former Maoists was a step in the right direction. Not only were they familiar with the battle craft of Maoists, but they were also acquainted with the jungle tracks as the back of their hands, which proved to be an unassailable asset in operations. Along with the CRPF and Cobra battalions, the DRG has achieved commendable success in joint operations. zzzThe intense pressure built up by the security forces brought the Maoists to their knees last year, pleading for peace talks with the Government. Rightly did the Governments, both at the Centre and the States, decline to hold any talks till they surrendered with their weapons? After the 21-day-long incessant operations launched by the CRPF, Cobra and other forces in Karregutta hills, in which 31 Maoists were killed, some who managed to escape in

small groups were in complete disarray and left without any directions or leaders. The surrender of Bhopali, a central committee member, along with 60 of his comrades, came as a huge setback to the movement.

The general secretary Thippiri Tirupathi alias Devuji branded him as a traitor and goaded other Maoists to continue with their struggle. Despite his call, the wave of surrenders continued in the affected states. The lure of a comfortable life promised to those who surrendered drew them in hordes.

His appeal notwithstanding and the strength of Maoists almost depleted, Devuji reconciled to the changed circumstances and surrendered to the Chief Minister of Telangana, A Revanth Reddy, on February 24, along with 21 others, marking the end of the Maoist movement in India.

While the states are verifying their antecedents and rehabilitating them, care needs to be taken to prevent the resurgence of the movement.

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Eradicating Naxalism

THE FINAL COUNTDOWN (2004 TO 2026)

September 2004: The PWC and the Maoist Communist Centre of India (MCCI) merge to form the CPI (Maoist)

2006: Prime Minister Manmohan Singh labels Naxalism the "greatest internal security threat" to India

April 2010: Dantewada Ambush - The deadliest single attack, where 76 CRPF personnel are killed in Chhattisgarh

2011: Security forces kill top leader Kishenji in West Bengal, signaling a shift toward intelligence-led operations

2013: Maoists kill 24 Congress leaders in the Darbha Valley attack

2017-2021: Major ambushes in Sukma and Bijapur continue, but the "Red Corridor" shrinks from 180 districts to under 70

April-May 2025: Operation Black Forest (Kagar) clears the Karregutta Hills, resulting in the death of general secretary Nambala Keshava Rao and 30 other insurgents

October 2025: Over 170 Naxalites surrender in Chhattisgarh in a single day, part of a trend of 10,000 surrenders over a decade

February 2026: Chhattisgarh Deputy CM declares the insurgency is in its "final phase"

March 30, 2026: The Indian government declares victory, stating all insurgents have surrendered or been eliminated, except for two commanders at large

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The end of the red shadow: How Indian Security Forces defeated Naxalism

PRAMOD KUMAR SINGH

In the dense forests of central and eastern India, a six-decade-long insurgency once threatened the nation's unity. Naxalism, born in the 1967 peasant uprising at Naxalbari village in West Bengal, evolved into a Maoist armed rebellion under the banner of the Communist Party of India (Maoist), formed in 2004. At its peak in the mid-2000s, the so-called 'Red Corridor' stretched across nearly 200 districts in ten states, claiming thousands of lives, civilians, security personnel, and insurgents alike. It crippled development in tribal heartlands, extorted locals, and challenged the Indian state's sovereignty. By 2014, 126 districts were officially Naxal-affected. Yet,

by March 31, 2026, Union Home Minister Amit Shah stood in Parliament declaring India 'Naxal-free'. The Politburo and Central Military Commission of the CPI(Maoist) lay dismantled. Organised left-wing extremism (LWE) had been crushed.

This was no accident. It was the result of relentless security operations, a determined political will, and an integrated strategy that combined force with development. The decline did not happen overnight. Successive governments had tried 'Operation Green Hunt' in the late 2000s, 'Salwa Judum' in Chhattisgarh but gains were patchy. Violence peaked around 2010 with over 1,000 incidents annually.

What changed after 2014 was a national policy that treated Naxalism not



Naxalism in the country is now on the verge of extinction... The country will be informed once the entire process is formally completed, but I can say that we have become Naxal-free

- AMIT SHAH, Union Home Minister

as a mere law-and-order issue but as India's biggest internal security threat.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi Government's National Policy and Action Plan on LWE, approved in 2015, laid the foundation. Central support flowed to states through funding, intelligence, and paramilitary forces. The real acceleration came under Amit Shah, who

assumed charge of the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) in 2019 and set a clear, time-bound target: eradicate Naxalism by March 31, 2026. Shah's approach was encapsulated in the SAMADHAN strategy, unveiled in 2017 but executed with ruthless efficiency in his tenure.

The acronym stood for Smart Leadership, Aggressive Strategy,

Motivation and Training, Actionable Intelligence, Dashboard-based monitoring, Harnessing Technology, Action Plan for each theatre, and No Access to Financing. It was not rhetoric. Dashboards tracked every district's progress in real time. Financing was choked through coordinated raids on extortion networks and hawala routes. Technology drones, satellite imagery, AI-driven intelligence, and encrypted communication transformed operations in jungles supposedly impenetrable.

The Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), its elite Cobra (Commando Battalion for Resolute Action) units, state police's District Reserve Guards (DRG) and specialised task forces formed the backbone.

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Geopolitics and Nepal's path ahead

Nepal must remain under the illusion that if India undermines it, China will come to its rescue, or vice versa. It may have been somewhat relevant in the past, but in today's age of information and technology, it is no more than a simplistic argument



JAGADISH PANT
Geopolitical analyst

The Gen-Z movement that took place in Nepal on September 8th and 9th laid the foundation for a political transformation. In the election held under the leadership of Sushila Karki that followed, the Rastriya Swatantra Party emerged as the largest party in Parliament, securing nearly a two-thirds majority. The traditional parties that had long struggled to establish democracy — particularly the Nepali Congress and CPN-UML — suffered a significant defeat in the election.

This clearly shows how dissatisfied the people had become with parties that believed they could do anything once in power. The fact that not even one-third of the electorate supported them in the polls reflects the depth of public frustration and disenchantment with the traditional ruling elite. These parties had grown accustomed to blaming neighbouring or other foreign countries for their inability to deliver, invoking the fear of external threats to capture power. This time, however, the people rejected them decisively. Forgetting that power is never permanent, these parties had entrenched themselves across all state institutions, assuming they could remain in power indefinitely through corruption and misgovernance.

This illusion was shattered as voters turned against them.

In the 2026 general election, the people gave a majority to the Rastriya Swatantra Party, electing 182 representatives out of 275 seats in the House of Representatives. By doing so, they entrusted the nation's future to a younger generation, appointing 35-year-old Balendra (Balen) Shah as Prime Minister. The new government faces the primary task of addressing widespread misgovernance and poverty and improving the standard of living of the people. At the same time, it must strengthen democratic practices, maintain mutually beneficial relations with neighbouring countries, and coordinate effectively with international powers. Nepal's neighbours, China and India, are already established global powers.

Maintaining balanced relations with both, while also fostering friendly ties with Western countries, is a major challenge for Nepal. Being situated between democratic India and commu-



nist China, Nepal must also balance the interests of the United States, a distant but influential advocate of democracy. Understanding US interests in India and China and shaping diplomacy accordingly is a complex task. Nepal must anticipate what these powers expect and respond with diplomatic skill.

Nepal, located between India and China, is not only geographically significant but also politically important to the general public. If Nepal fails to adopt a balanced diplomatic approach, the country risks being caught in the pressures of global powers.

The old political forces, particularly the Nepali Congress and CPN-UML, which alternated in power by leveraging relations with India and China, have now been rejected by the people. The time has passed when parties could win votes by blaming India or China for development failures. These parties failed to recognise this shift. Attempts to mask incompetence by criticising neighbouring countries no longer resonate with the electorate. Blaming neighbouring countries for internal political instability while ignoring internal conflicts and declining public trust has cost these traditional parties dearly. A balanced neighbourhood policy is a hallmark of strong diplomacy, and the newly formed government must prioritise this approach.

There has been much speculation regarding the MCC (Millennium Challenge Corporation) agreement between Nepal and the United States. Along with MCC, the proposed SPP (State Partnership Programme) agreement may also bring elements of US security policy. If Nepal assumes that India and China will naturally accept the presence of US security frameworks in the region, such thinking would reflect immature diplomacy. China is already cautious regarding US involvement in Tibet-related matters, and India may perceive US interest in its northeastern states as a security concern.



Although the United States may have no intention beyond assisting Nepal, public suspicion remains that such involvement could lead to interference in Nepal's internal politics

Nepal's strategy in addressing these legitimate concerns will play a crucial role in determining its future. Although the United States may have no intention beyond assisting Nepal, public suspicion remains that such involvement could lead to interference in Nepal's internal politics. The government must take wise and transparent steps to address these concerns. If Nepal, under the influence of American power, allows itself to become a strategic platform between India and China, there is a real possibility that these

two countries could come together and determine Nepal's future themselves.

China, for instance, might even urge India to manage Nepal in its own way if it perceives Nepal's diplomacy as inadequate. Nepal must not remain under the illusion that if India undermines it, China will come to its rescue, or vice versa. This way of thinking is outdated. It may have been somewhat relevant in the past, but in today's age of information and technology, it is no more than a simplistic argument.

It is natural for neighbouring countries to remain alert to the possibility that Nepal could be used in ways that threaten their security. It is equally important for Nepal to be cautious about foreign-funded NGOs and NGOs potentially raising border disputes in ways that could strain relations with India. Whether with India or China, Nepal must resolve border issues through mutual agreement based on historical evidence. Following the formation of Sushila Karki's government, the fact that the Dalai Lama was among the first to offer congratulations may have raised concerns in both China

and India. Similarly, the increase in Rohingya refugees in Nepal's Terai region along the Indian border — from Purnia to Champaran — and the increased presence of Americans in the Himalayan region after the formation of the new government may have been perceived as security concerns by neighbouring countries.

While Nepal cannot compromise on its sovereignty and self-respect, it is its diplomatic responsibility to address such concerns and dispel the suspicions of its neighbours. The United States may primarily seek to expand its trade in the vast populations of India and China, while also maintaining a strategic balance. In that context, it may view Nepal as a convenient vantage point to observe China. However, India may fear that US presence in Nepal could also extend its gaze towards India. Under such mutual suspicions, India and China could find common ground and jointly influence Nepal's future. A country that fails to formulate a clear foreign policy yet complains that others do not act in its interest reflects weakness. Nepal must move beyond the flawed policies of the past and define a clear national strategy. Nepal may find success by adopting a cultural diplomacy approach — presenting Panchsheelism to India as a symbol of Sanatan Hindu spirituality.

At the same time, Nepal's economic, social, religious, and cultural ties with India are deeply embedded in everyday life, making the relationship naturally unique and special. These bonds have evolved over centuries and must be acknowledged with equal depth. Nepal's goal should be to establish itself as a strong and prosperous nation by maintaining relations with the United States, Europe, and other countries based on the principles of Panchsheel and peaceful coexistence. By developing as a centre of Eastern philosophy and spirituality, Nepal can position itself as a global hub of peace on the world stage.

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FROM AGENDA COVER

Defeating Naxalism: How the red...

With no leaders, weapons or finances, resurgence in near future is well-nigh impossible. The intelligence wings of the states will however have to maintain an eagle's eye to ensure that any effort at resurgence is nipped in the bud.

Since IEDs have been planted in the jungles, the security forces cannot afford to be lax until all IEDs are removed. Last year, about 900 IEDs were detected and removed in Bastar and more are being removed with the help of the surrendered Maoists. The IEDs have proved to be obstacles in the operations launched in Serenda forests to apprehend Misi Bresa, the last of the top leaders and his group in Jharkhand. The only other top leader Ganapathy is reported to be ailing and in touch with Telengana police to surrender after recovery. Though Maoist movement has ended, the continued deployment of security forces would be a deterrent for any kind of resurgence. The forces could be a bridge between the local population and the Government for the overall development of the regions that were deprived of welfare schemes launched by the states.

The author served as Commandant, commanding a CRPF battalion in Karimnagar, Ramagundam, Bellampally, Mancherial and Adilabad districts of Telangana from 1996 to 1998

The end of the red shadow: How Indian...

Over 1 lakh personnel were deployed in multi-state operations like Operation Kagor (launched 2024) and earlier drives such as Octopus, Double Bull and Chakrabandha. Fortified police stations jumped from 66 in 2014 to 612 by 2026. New security camps, helpads and 400 bulletproof vehicles strengthened logistics.

Inter-state coordination became seamless under Shah's oversight. Intelligence-led "Trace, Target, Neutralise" missions dismantled the Maoist hierarchy. Top leaders, including Politburo members, were eliminated or forced to surrender. MHA data speaks for itself. Between 2024 and March 2026 alone, security forces neutralised 706 Naxalites in encounters, arrested 2,218 and facilitated the surrender of 4,839. In 2025, 270 were killed, 680 arrested, and over 1,200 surrendered in a single year.

Brave jawans of the CRPF, state police and CoBRA paid with their lives in ambushes and IED blasts. Yet their sacrifice steadily reclaimed territory. Bastar division in Chhattisgarh, the epicentre of Maoist power saw Naxalism "almost eradicated," as Shah noted. Once a no-go zone, it now hosts schools in every village, roads, and administrative out-



posts. The Red Corridor shrank dramatically: from 126 affected districts in 2014 to just two or three by early 2026. Most-affected districts fell from 35 to zero. States like Bihar declared themselves Naxal-free after the surrender of the last armed cadre. Jharkhand, Odisha, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh followed suit as violence incidents dropped over 77-89 per cent from 2010 levels. Civilian and security force deaths plummeted by over 91 per cent. Shah repeatedly emphasised the

"Clear, Hold, Develop" doctrine. Security operations cleared areas; forces held them with permanent camps and patrols; development followed swiftly. The MHA pumped resources into Left-Wing Extremism-affected regions through the Security Related Expenditure (SRE) scheme and Special Infrastructure Scheme (SIS). All-weather roads under PMGSY pierced forests, enabling markets, schools and hospitals to reach tribals. Electricity, telecom towers, banking, and postal services

arrived where Maoists once blocked progress. Tribal welfare schemes such as housing, scholarships, skill training addressed root grievances of alienation and underdevelopment.

Surrender policies offered rehabilitation packages, land, jobs and security. Thousands of former Naxalites, disillusioned by the leadership's hypocrisy and the futility of violence, laid down arms. Local communities, long caught cooperating with the gun and the state, began cooperating with forces, providing vital intelligence.

Amit Shah's personal oversight was decisive. He held regular high-level reviews, visited affected states, and coordinated with chief ministers. In Parliament and public addresses, he blamed decades of neglect under previous regimes particularly Congress for allowing the insurgency to fester. Under his watch, the narrative shifted from containment to elimination.

"Naxalism in the country is now on the verge of extinction," Shah declared in the Lok Sabha days before the deadline. The Maoist central structure was "almost completely dismantled." On March 31, 2026, as the government's self-imposed target was met, Shah announced that India had become Naxal-free. The formal declaration followed exhaustive verification: no major incidents, no active armed squads, and development indices rising in former

hotbeds.

The victory belongs first to the men and women in uniform, the CRPF jawans who patrolled malaria-infested forests, the CoBRA commandos who survived booby-trapped trails, the state police officers who built trust in villages. It belongs to the intelligence agencies that mapped every hideout. It belongs to the tribals who chose peace over fear. And it bears the imprint of Amit Shah's iron resolve, a Home Minister who refused to accept perpetual insurgency as India's fate.

Today, the forests of Bastar and Dandakaranya echo not with gunfire but with the sounds of tractors, school bells, and mobile phones. Roads connect once-isolated hamlets to markets. Children study without fear. Farmers till land without extortion. The end of Naxalism is not merely a security milestone. It is a developmental revolution. It proves that determined leadership, professional forces and an integrated approach, security plus development plus governance can heal even the deepest wounds. India's success offers a global template: insurgencies thrive on neglect and division; they die when the state delivers both justice and opportunity. Bharat honours its security forces and salutes the political will that refused to compromise.

The writer is the Resident Editor of The Pioneer

Opinion

SUNDAY, APRIL 5, 2026



Sunrisers Hyderabad players celebrate after the wicket of Kolkata Knight Riders' Cameron Green during the IPL 2026 at Eden Gardens in Kolkata

No point complaining about missing foreigners

RINGSIDE VIEW

Tushar Bhaduri

WHEN ONE LOOKS back at the first few seasons of the Indian Premier League, one recalls a who's who of international cricket on display. The first edition in 2008 even featured top Pakistani players and the England players, conspicuous by their absence in the first couple of years, soon became a regular feature.

Cut to 2026, and the overseas contingent at most teams gives an underwhelming feeling. There may be quality in the largely unknown quantity on show, as young Aussie Cooper Connolly and Kiwi pacer Jacob Duffy showed on their IPL debuts, and the likes of Lungi Ngidi can be expected to do a job, but none of the foreign stars have the aura of a Shane Warne, Kevin Pietersen, Chris Gayle, Kumar Sangakkara or AB de Villiers.

It doesn't help that the packed international calendar and off-field issues have ensured that the best overseas players haven't always featured in the league. So, while Pakistani players were persona non grata after the inaugural edition due to the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks and the tense bilateral ties between the two countries, Bangladesh pacer Mustafizur Rahman couldn't participate even after being picked in the auction (a development that IPL chairman Arun Dhumal termed 'unfortunate').

But the ongoing edition has seen players pulled out after being picked (Ben Duckett), limiting their involvement due to injury or different priorities (Pat Cummins, Mitchell Starc, Josh Hazlewood), not employing all facets of their game (Cameron Green), or just not finding the tournament worth their while (Adam Zampa).

It has prompted some to argue that the franchises that have acquired them were being taken for a ride and were not getting full value for their money. There have also been calls to cut a proportionate amount from their contract amount as it hampers the team's balance and planning for the season.

This issue came to the spotlight when Kolkata Knight Riders captain Ajinkya Rahane responded to a query about why Green, recognised as an all-rounder, didn't bowl in their opening loss against Mumbai Indians by saying that the question should be put to Cricket Australia.

The latter responded by saying that KKR were kept in the loop about the restrictions on Green's bowling. The cricketer suffers from a chronic kidney disease and has to be managed appropriately. He hadn't bowled much for Australia either in recent times.

Priorities set

The delayed involvement of the Aussie Big 3 — Starc, Hazlewood and Cummins — is a function of them prioritising Tests, and international cricket in general, over their IPL gig. Australia has a loaded calendar over the next 18 months or so and the veteran pacer trio want to be in the best shape for that.

It's a similar case with England batsman Ben Duckett, who pulled out of the IPL a few days before it commenced to be at his best for national duty after a horror Ashes series. As a result, the left-hander has been blacklisted, like England's white-ball captain Harry Brook, and won't be eligible for the IPL auction

before the 2029 edition of the league.

The IPL may be the most lucrative cricketing assignment but these players have prioritised turning up for their country, which got them on the IPL radar in the first place. The IPL is a strenuous tournament, taking its toll on the mind and body, which may not leave players at their freshest for subsequent series or tournaments.

Zampa's reason for giving the IPL a miss is an interesting one. Arguably one of the best white-ball spinners in contemporary cricket — having a 50-over and 20-over world title on his resume — he argued that his skills didn't receive adequate monetary compensation, and with the IPL going on for much longer than any other domestic league, he chose to play in the Pakistan Super League instead.

It's called the Indian Premier League for a reason and the main attractions remain the home players — especially as the Men in Blue have won back-to-back T20 World Cups. However, big a foreign player is, he will get second billing after the Indian superstars. That's why MS Dhoni continues to be the darling of the broadcasters and marketing men even though he went past his sell-by date a long time ago.

Only four foreigners are allowed in a team — including the Impact Player — and it's the Indian players who are expected to make the big difference now. It's not as if Green's bowling in the game against Mumbai Indians, or in KKR's next match against Sunrisers Hyderabad, would have made a whole lot of difference. He would have been just another option at Rahane's disposal.

Opportunities galore

Cummins even skipped the T20 World Cup and said that he would have pushed his body had it been an important Test series. It says all that one needs to know about his priorities. He played just one of the five Ashes Tests while Hazlewood missed the series altogether. In their absence, Starc had to take a lot more load as the leader of the bowling attack and after five games in a compressed period, reckoned he needed some extra time to recharge his batteries before joining Delhi Capitals.

The IPL is an annual cricketing extravaganza and is not dependent on one or more players, especially if they are foreigners to garner eyeballs. India is at the forefront of T20 cricket, with a long list of quality players pushing the incumbents for a spot in the national side. Leave aside Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma and the heroes of the World Cupwin, the likes of Vaibhav Sooryavansi are match-winners for their respective sides.

In such a scenario, it's a bit far-fetched to attribute the poor performance of a team to the absence of a foreign player. If anything, it provides an opportunity to a home-grown player to catch the eye.

KKR's bowling attack conceded the two scores in excess of 220 in their first two games — one bowling first and one second. Green was never going to be a frontline bowling option, who could make a match-winning difference.

Sunrisers Hyderabad, Royal Challengers Bengaluru and Capitals need to stay in the reckoning before their major overseas signings enter the fray. Hazlewood was a key reason for RCB winning their first IPL title last year while Cummins has been an inspirational leader for his franchise. Starc won the title for KKR a couple of years ago, but if their teams are over-reliant on them, it doesn't shed a positive light on the team management and their performance at the auction.

ACROSS THE AISLE

P Chidambaram



The electoral battle in Kerala, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal will be between the Left-of-centre and the Right-of-centre political formations. The performance of each party will cast a halo or a shadow on its fortunes. It is especially so for the BJP that is considered alien to the two regions' political and social ethos

I DO NOT know which planets will confluence or which planet will be retrograde but, looking at the political scene in India, I can say 'we live in interesting times'.

Contrasting fundamentals

Elections to the Assemblies of Assam, Kerala, the UT of Puducherry, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal will be conducted on April 9, 23 and 30. For the first time in recent years in Kerala, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal, the BJP is challenging entrenched left-of-centre political parties. In the ideological spectrum, both the UDF and the LDF in Kerala are positioned on the Left of the centre. The DMK-led front in Tamil Nadu (that includes Congress) and the AITC (TMC) in West Bengal are avowedly Left-of-centre parties. All of them swear by the Constitution, federalism, primacy of Parliament/Legislature, secularism, social justice, development with equity, welfare measures, freedom of media, and liberal economy. The LDF, DMK and TMC rule the respective state governments.

The challenger is the BJP that has positioned itself on the Right of the ideological spectrum. I can think of only the RSS as more to the Right, but the RSS claims it is not a political party. However, it reluctantly concedes that its prominent leaders were, and are, in key positions in the BJP organisation, and many ministers of BJP governments were *pracharaks* and continue to be *swayamsevaks*. The common citizen views the RSS as the parent and the BJP



Tamil Nadu deputy chief minister Udhayanidhi Stalin greets supporters during an election campaign in Sivaganga, Tamil Nadu

The interesting times of April

as the child. The BJP's policies and laws are firmly grounded in the ideas of Hindu supremacy (*Hindutva*), faith in Vedic scriptures and practices, Aryan civilization or culture, centralism, primacy of Executive, a common language (Hindi), vegetarianism, One Nation One Government, and Korean *chaebol*-like friendly business houses. The BJP under Mr Modi has made a deliberate break with the consensus that had prevailed until 2014.

The ensuing electoral battle in the three States will be between the Left-of-centre and the Right-of-centre political formations.

Kerala

The Congress-led UDF and the CPI(M)-led LDF have held sway during the last fifty years. The small parties have gravitated to one or the other bloc. Kerala's voters alternated between the UDF and the LDF but in 2021 they broke the pattern by re-electing the LDF which had won in 2016. Both Fronts are strong and have sharpened their electoral strategies. The popular view is that the LDF has ruled for two terms under the aging Mr Pinarayi Vijayan, and it is time for change. The inept response of the LDF government to the floods (2018) and the Wayanad landslide (2024) has severely damaged the LDF. The Congress has many capable and relatively young leaders, and is confident of the UDF winning a comfortable majority.

The BJP does not seem to understand the DNA of the people of Kerala.

The guessing game is on how many seats the BJP will be able to win; the bet is on a single digit.

Tamil Nadu

The DMK-led front of 2021 and 2024 is intact — and Mr M K Stalin has prevailed upon smaller parties to contest on the DMK's symbol. The strategy will prevent the dissipation of votes. The AIADMK-led front has suffered erosion of votes since the elections of 2021 (Assembly) and 2024 (LS), but has garnered the support of AMMK, a splinter group of AIADMK. Ironically, a month ago, the AMMK had sworn to never accept Mr E. Palanisamy as the leader of the AIADMK or the CM face of the alliance!

What does the BJP bring to the AIADMK's table? Certainly, power of the central government; resources; ICG's tacit support; and the divisive rhetoric of BJP's national leaders. Those factors did not work in 2021 and 2024, and may not work in 2026 too.

The BJP is contesting 27 (out of 234 seats) and the speculation on how many seats it will win ranges from the low single digit to 10.

Because of the presence of Tamizha Vettri Katchagam (TKV), founded by Mr Joseph Vijay) and Naam Tamizhar Katchi (headed by a trenchant critic of all political parties) — and their capacity to split votes — the election in each constituency will be close but the overall outcome will be in favour of one front — poll observers and veteran journalists assess that the DMK-led alliance

will be voted back to power.

West Bengal

It is practically a straight fight between the ruling AITC (TMC) and the challenger BJP. The ruling parties of yesteryears, the Congress and the CPI(M), are expected to train their fire on the BJP but are not expected to affect the ultimate result. The battle is fiercely joined between the perennial warrior, Ms Mamata Banerjee, and the persistent challengers, Messrs Modi & Shah. The contest goes beyond the political and has become physical, raw and visceral. It has stirred the passions of the people of West Bengal to defend their culture, literature, language, ethos, communal harmony, patriotism, and reverence for their icons such as Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and Anurag Sen. If Bengali pride and self-esteem prevail, Ms Banerjee and her party will triumph for the fourth time in a row.

The three states are outside the Hindi heartland. The performance of each party will cast a halo or a shadow on the fortunes of the party. It is especially so for the BJP that is considered alien to the two regions' political and social ethos.

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INSIDE TRACK
COOMI KAPOOR



I spy tit for tat

For the first time, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, a body set up by the US Congress, has named R&AW, the government's external intelligence wing, as a threat to religious freedom in India. R&AW has been included by the commission along with the RSS, which has been mentioned for the last several years. The Commission has, in fact, repeatedly recommended for that India be placed on the Country of Particular Concern watchlist.

Incidentally, the capture of six Ukrainians and one US citizen, who travelled without the necessary government permission to Mizoram, and imported a huge consignment of drones from Europe has come as a boon to India.

The foreign nationals are yet to be granted consular access and the Indian media speculates whether their mission was to train ethnic groups in the Northeast states or in the border region of Myanmar, or

both. Last week, Home Minister Amit Shah said that they posed no threat and were probably passing through and were headed to Myanmar for terrorist training.

Nevertheless, the Indian government does not use the American Matthew VanDyke, rumoured to be a CIA asset, as a bargaining chip for aborting the US extradition of former R&AW agent Vikash Yadav for his alleged role in the attempted murder of Gurbatwint Singh Pannun, an American-Canadian citizen in the USA. Presently, Yadav is a fugitive in India. VanDyke once claimed that he worked with Christian militia.

Diplomatic drift

A significant shift in India's position on the US-Iran conflict emerged after Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri called on the Iranian embassy in New Delhi and signed the condolence book for Iranian leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on March 5.

Earlier the Indian government had maintained a stony silence on the death of Khamenei in an airstrike by the US-Israeli forces on February 28. Indian ambassadors, who anxiously contacted New Delhi for advice before March 5, when the Iranian consulate condolence book in their respective countries would be placed, were initially advised to stay away.

Misri, who has worked as joint secretary in the PMO and has also been

private secretary to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, clearly has a direct line to Modi.

Following his condolence call, Indian ambassadors everywhere followed suit. Misri is seen as a possible replacement for Vinay Kwatra, India's ambassador to the USA, whose term expires on July 14. Kwatra, who was an able and proactive translator of some of Modi's speeches for international audiences, is viewed as being somewhat out of his depth in Washington, where networking with Trump's inner circle requires a very different set of skills, as Pakistan has demonstrated. India's lack of access in the Trump administration was evident from the fact that the services of our highly paid Washington lobbyist were sometimes utilised to arrange meetings between the envoy and Trump's secretaries or Vice President JD Vance. Normally, such lobbyists are expected to influence Washington's decision-making by enabling interactions with the President directly as well as elected members of the US Congress and Senate.

Major stumbling block

One cause for the congress's continuing decline is the absence of a political secretary or advisor to the party president. Indra Gandhi had valuable interfaces such as RK Dhawan and M.L. Fotedar, even if they did not have the official designation.

Jitendra Prasad was political adviser to both Rajiv Gandhi and PV Narasimha Rao. Sonia Gandhi relied on Amibha Soni initially and later depended on Ahmed Patel, who worked quietly behind the scenes, placating bruised egos and giving an honest feedback to the high command of what was happening on the ground. Malikarjuna Kharge took over as party president in 2022 but has been too intimidated to appoint a political secretary till now. The all-powerful Congress secretary (organisation) K C Venugopal, who has Rahul Gandhi's ear, does not want any rival power centre even though he himself is a complete failure at his job.

Boots on ground

Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu's Secretary Kartikeya Misra's attitude rubs both politicians and bureaucrats the wrong way.

Last month, at a function in Vijayawada, Misra lost his cool and berated two junior IAS officers publicly for not dressing appropriately. The puzzled bureaucrats explained they were toggled out in full formal attire. It emerged that Misra felt that sandals were not suitable footwear and insisted that they should have worn lace-up shoes. An agitated Misra even asked the district officer his foot size. The next day, the bureaucrat received a pair of lace-up shoes couriered by Misra.

DECCAN Chronicle

5 APRIL 2026



Shashi Warriar

Off the beaten track

The meaning of education: Full bellies, empty minds?

My ex-professor friend Raghavan turned up the other day, looking hungover. Turned out he wasn't; he was merely depressed...

The samosas didn't cheer him up but, they did get him talking. "The institute where I teach part-time," he explained, finishing a samosa in two large mouthfuls...

"That didn't seem too much of a disaster, and I said so. "Little do you know," he moaned. "The old university was too far away to interfere with that I taught..."

"What's that meant?" asked Prita. "The university lets me do what I want to with the course," replied Raghavan...

"Yes," said Prita, "but so what?" "Well," said Raghavan, "if the difference between my marks and the external examiner's marks is more than 15 per cent..."

"Don't you have similar standards in communication?" said Murthy. "Yes," said Raghavan. "They tell you how to make a good presentation, how to dress for an interview..."

"One way to do this," Raghavan said, "is to teach students to look at the same thing from different points of view. Let them think up the positives and negatives on all sides..."

"So why can't you do that?" asked Murthy. "Because the university doesn't allow it," said Raghavan. "This semester, when the university asked me to set the end semester question paper, the most important question I asked students to compare the pros and cons of two alternatives..."

"What?" said Prita, sitting up straight in outrage. "Don't they want students to think?" "Of course not," said Murthy. "It's only the good universities that do that..."

"Exactly," said Raghavan. "Thinking clearly helps them make good decisions, too! I always thought business schools, and therefore universities, intended to show them that..."

"What do you mean?" asked Prita. "The average university doesn't teach what it can't test," said Murthy. "So students learn not to have thoughts that can't be graded easily," said Murthy...

Shashi Warriar is an author and a columnist



Chokepoints and tyranny of geography in globalised era



Manish Tewari

State Of The Union

In an age defined by globalisation, digital connectivity and complex supply chains, it's easy to believe geography has receded in importance. The reality is quite the opposite...

These waterways are important because of the high volume of global trade and oil that passes through them. Bab el-Mandeb (linking the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean) handles roughly 12% of global trade...

The term "tyranny of geography" embodies a key concept that countries must consider their affairs in accordance with physical constraints. A good example of this is Russia, which despite its size, has limited waterway access...

One such waterway is the Strait of Malacca, which provides a passage between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. The Strait of Malacca is one of the world's most important shipping routes...

The Strait of Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb are not constrained by geography so much, but they are very vulnerable to security risks. These waterways are important because of the high volume of global trade...

Similarly, Chinese maritime strategy is limited by chokepoints such as Taiwan, which India's energy security is very dependent on unimpeded passage through the Strait of Hormuz. These are not just issues that can be readily adjusted, rather they are geographical constraints that must be managed...

The global maritime system is a closely integrated system. Disruption in one location quickly ripples outward. For instance, if a problem arises in the Strait of Hormuz, oil tankers will be forced to take an alternative route, like going around the Cape of Good Hope...

The Strait of Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb are not constrained by geography so much, but they are very vulnerable to security risks.

These are the narrow waterways through which much of global trade passes. They include the Strait of Hormuz, the Malacca Strait, Bab el-Mandeb, and the Bosphorus.

under UNCLOS ensures that freedom of navigation is not impaired through international straits. However, recent events demonstrate that legal guarantees can be undermined by geopolitical tensions...

Efforts to reduce dependence on chokepoints are ongoing. Overland trade corridors, pipelines and alternative maritime routes have been explored to bypass the vulnerable passages.

The Chinese "Belt and Road Initiative" aims to create land-based trade routes to reduce China's dependence on maritime chokepoints. Another alternative being considered is Arctic maritime routes...

However, such alternatives remain limited in terms of scale and feasibility. They often involve higher costs, new risks, or geopolitical complications. Ultimately, such alternatives do matter how they contribute to reducing vulnerability...

The world's trading system is built on a vulnerable physical foundation. The efficiency of the system depends on the continued smooth flow of a handful of narrow maritime passages. When these passages are stable, global trade flows smoothly...

Chokepoints also shape the physical design of shipping. The concept of "Malaccamax" vessels (ships designed specifically to fit the draft limitations of the Malacca Strait) illustrates how geography directly influences industrial standards.

Chokepoints are also areas of geopolitical tension. Where flows are compressed, and where vulnerabilities are concentrated. In this world, resilience is a necessity, and diversification of routes, strategic reserves and international cooperation...

In addition, the freedom of navigation that the chokepoints is also protected by international law. The principle of transit passage

LETTERS LANGUAGE POLICY

The Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) has rolled out its new curriculum stressing on a three-language formula from Class 6 and a two-level system of assessment in science and mathematics for Class 9...

From one really wonders about the need for the change. It is known that in CBSE schools, English is very important right from kindergarten classes. CBSE schools will find it difficult to adapt to these changes...

S. Ramakrishnasayee, Chennai.

AUTOCRATS ALL

The cartoon by Subhani depicting Raghav Chadha, MP, being whacked with a broomstick, the party's symbol, by his party chief Arvind Kejriwal (DC, April 4) neatly captures a deeper malaise not just within the Aam Aadmi Party, but across most parties...

When they are disrupted, the effects are both immediate and far-reaching. The "tyranny" of geography reminds us that, despite advances in technology and globalisation, we still live in a world where physical constraints shape economic and strategic outcomes.

Chokepoints are a permanent fixture in this landscape, and where global flows are compressed, and where vulnerabilities are concentrated. In this world, resilience is a necessity, and diversification of routes, strategic reserves and international cooperation...

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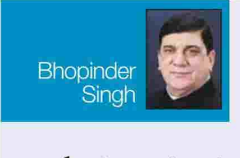
Manish Tewari is a third-term Lok Sabha MP and former Union Minister. Twitter handle @ManishTewari

NO TIME FOR JOKES

AMID THE intensifying Israel-US-IRAN conflict, remarks attributed to Donald Trump — such as suggesting renaming the Strait of Hormuz after himself, dismissing all military assets as "toys," and making exaggerated claims about oil shipments sent as "gestures" — stand in stark contrast to the heavy casualties and military setbacks in Lebanon. These lighter or offbeat remarks, often delivered alongside serious policy announcements, suggest a leadership style under strain — using humour, bravado or hyperbole to dominate narratives amid escalating war pressures, economic shocks, and military uncertainty. Globally, such statements draw mixed reactions: allies view them as undermining gravity and coordination, while adversaries exploit them for propaganda, reinforcing concerns about inconsistency and credibility. US leadership during a widening and volatile conflict.

V. Nagarajan, Chennai

R.S. Narula, Patiala



Bhopinder Singh

As the 'No Kings' movement sweeps America, can US troops stay aloof?

The United States of America, after living through well over a year of President Donald Trump's administration in his second term at the White House, appears gripped by the "No Kings" protests aimed at defending and protecting their democratic and constitutional values. Rooted in the American Revolution when 13 colonies broke away from British rule under King George III, it was a protest idea to call-out leaders acting "above the law"...

one of the most unpopular US military conflicts in the early stages. But President Trump viciously attacks any disagreement with him by claiming, "I am the one that makes the decision," as if any contrary view has no space in the "new normal" of US democracy. His chilling post-2022 about his desire to "terminate the Constitution" was an unheeded warning of his mindset.

The US armed forces have traditionally been a totally apolitical institution and are naturally in the spotlight through any time of military conflict. While the US President is indeed commander-in-chief of the armed forces, presidential conduct too must abide by the mandated constitutional restraint, and therefore the legal obligation of the US military to refuse unconstitutional orders of any kind. While Mr Trump is fully empowered to conduct an unpopular war, many of his actions are increasingly coming under "grey areas" of constitutionality. Was there a US Congress authorisation for the full-scale escalation of the conflict? Did the approval of a decision in legal terms? Has there been a

potential violation of the War Powers Resolution (reconstituting notification to Congress on the status of war within timelines)? But, like all insecure authoritarianism, Mr Trump routinely drums up fear-mongering, jingoism, and dog-whistling against anyone opposing his imperial wars.

Earlier, tensions between the US armed forces and Donald Trump had publicly manifested with the fracas between President Trump and the then chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Mark Milley, when the topmost serving general had warned against any deployment of active-duty troops domestically, under the Insurrection Act, as desired by Mr Trump. Even earlier, Gen. Milley had apologised for his inadvertent role in the infamous Lafayette Square photocop, which in the informed opinion of the general had compromised the military's institutional and moral authority. On his retirement, Gen. Mark Milley was to frame a prophetic, yet relevant warning that has suddenly become relevant yet again: "I do not take an oath to a king, a queen, or to a tyrant or a dictator. And we don't take an oath to a wannabe dictator. We take an oath to the Constitution, and we take an oath to the idea that is America, and we're willing to die to protect it."

Today, with no endgame in sight, the United States is paying dearly for its misinformed endeavour and bravado in Iran. The already grilling economy is further being sapped with a \$1 billion per day bill, and a projected \$1 trillion cost, overall. At least 13 American military "body bags" have already returned home, and the asymmetric threat as promised by the Iranians has just about started. The equipment and infrastructural losses to the American military with the purported downing of jets and attacks on bases is yet to be calculated. US household budgets will be further squeezed with the inflationary impact, fall in real wages, increase in borrowing costs and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has warned of inflation rising 4.2 per cent, up from an earlier expectation of three per cent. All this potential pain, disruption and mayhem to the global order, as well as to the American citizenry, is because the impetuous Donald Trump insists on his "kinglike" ways.

Mr Trump had tried to fill the US military with his loyalists in a leadership purge at the start of his second presidential term, but most of the unimpaired careers remain avowedly non-partisan and constitutionalists. As the direct folks in the proverbial line-of-fire by Mr Trump's decisions, it is only a matter of time that someone like Gen. Mark Milley may stand up to express telling "concerns". Even the otherwise restrained consistency of veterans (especially during ongoing military ops) are voicing unmistakable suggestions of overreach and recklessness by President Trump. A highly decorated and revered veteran Gen. James "Mad Dog" Mattis, a former secretary of defence to Mr Trump, has candidly admitted that the US "does not have many good options in its war on Iran".

The previous rounds of "No Kings" rallies in October had drawn nearly seven million protesters, but this time the unilateralism of Mr Trump is hitting average Americans even harder. So far, the serving US military leadership has remained tight-lipped, but the grassroots of opinion and the accompanying situation may soon trigger waves of concern, echoing the "No Kings" sentiments and spirits in their ranks as well.

The writer is a retired lieutenant general and a former lieutenant-governor of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands (Puducherry)

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The interesting times of April



ACROSS THE AISLE
BY P CHIDAMBARAM

DO NOT know which planets will confluence or which planet will be retrograde, looking at the political scene in India, I can say 'we live in interesting times'.

Contrasting Fundamentals

Elections to the Assemblies of Assam, Kerala, the UT of Puducherry, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal will be conducted on April 9, 23 and 29. For the first time in recent years in Kerala, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal, the BJP is challenging entrenched Left-of-centre political parties. In the ideological spectrum, both the UDF and the LDF in Kerala are positioned on the Left of the centre. The DMK-led front in Tamil Nadu (that includes Congress) and the AITC (TMC) in West Bengal are avowedly Left-of-centre parties. All of them swear by the Constitution, federalism, primacy of Parliament/Legislature, secularism, social justice, development with equity, welfare measures, freedom of the media, and liberal economy. The LDF, DMK and TMC rule the respective state governments.



INSIDE TRACK | BY COOMI KAPOOR

ISPY TIT FOR TAT

For the first time, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, a body set up by the US Congress, has named R&AW, the government's external intelligence wing, as a threat to religious freedom in India. R&AW has been included by the commission along with the RSS, which has been mentioned for the last several years. The Commission has, in fact, repeatedly recommended for that India be placed on the Country of Particular Concern watchlist.

Incidentally, the capture of six Ukrainians and one US citizen, who travelled without the necessary government permission to Mizoram, and imported a huge consignment of drones from Europe has come as a boon to India. The foreign nationals are yet to be granted consular access and the Indian media speculates whether their mission was to train ethnic groups in the Northeast states or in the border region of Myanmar, or both. Last week, Home Minister Amit Shah said that they posed no threat and were probably passing through and were headed to Myanmar for terrorist training. Nevertheless, the Indian government could use the American, Mathew Vandyke, rumoured to be a CIA asset, as a bargaining chip for aborting the US extradition of former R&AW agent Vikash Yadav for his alleged role in the attempted murder of Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, an American-Canadian citizen in the USA. Presently, Yadav is a fugitive in India. Vandyke once claimed that he worked with Christian militia.

DIPLOMATIC DRIFT

A significant shift in India's position on the US-Iran conflict emerged after Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri called on the Iranian embassy in New Delhi and signed the condolence book for Iranian leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on March 5. Earlier the Indian government had maintained a stony silence on the death of Khamenei in an airstrike by the US-Israeli forces on February 28. Indian ambassadors, who anxiously contacted New Delhi for advice before March 5, when the Iranian consulate condolence book in their respective countries would be placed, were initially advised to stay away. Misri, who has worked as joint secretary in the PMO and has also been private secretary to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, clearly has a direct line to Modi. Following his condolence call, Indian ambassadors everywhere following suit.

Misri is seen as a possible replacement for Vinay Kwatra, India's ambassador to the USA, whose term expires on July 14. Kwatra, who was an able and proactive translator of some of Modi's speeches for international audiences, is viewed as being somewhat out of this depth in Washington, where networking with Trump's inner circle requires a very different set of skills, as Pakistan has demonstrated. India's lack of access in the Trump administration was evident from the fact that the services of our highly paid Washington lobbyists were sometimes utilised to arrange meetings between the envoy and Trump's secretaries or Vice President JD Vance. Normally, such lobbyists are expected to influence Washington's decision-making by enabling interactions with the President directly as well as elected members of the US Congress and Senate.

MAJOR STUMBLING BLOCK

One cause for the Congress's continuing decline is the absence of a political secretary or advisor to the party president. Indira Gandhi had several close confidantes such as KK Dhanwan and ML Fotedar, even if they did not have the official designation. Jitendra Prasad was political advisor to both Rajiv Gandhi and P V Narasimha Rao. Sonia Gandhi relied on Ambica Soni initially and later depended on Ahmed Patel, who worked quietly behind the scenes, placating business egos and giving an honest feedback to the high command of what was happening on the ground. Mallikarjun Kharge took over as party president in 2022 but had no formal title. He was appointed to a political secretary till now. The all-powerful Congress secretary (organisation) KC Venugopal, who has Rahul Gandhi's ear, does not want any rival power centre even though he himself is a complete failure at his job.

BOOTS ON GROUND

Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu's secretary Kartikeya Misra's attitude rubs both politicians and bureaucrats the wrong way. Last month, at a function in Vijayawada, Misra lost his cool and berated two junior IAS officers publicly for not dressing appropriately. The puzzled bureaucrats explained they were toggled out in full formal attire. It emerged that Misra felt that sandals were not suitable footwear and insisted that they should have worn lace-up shoes. An agitated Misra even asked the district officer his foot size. The next day, the bureaucrat received a pair of lace-up shoes couriered by Misra.

The challenger is the BJP that has positioned itself on the Right of the ideological spectrum. I can think of only the RSS as more to the Right, but the RSS claims it is not a political party. However, it reluctantly concedes that its prominent leaders were, and are, in key positions in the BJP organisation, and many ministers of BJP governments were *pracharakas* and continue to be *swagmans*. The common citizen views the RSS as the parent and the BJP as the child. The BJP's policies and laws are firmly grounded in the ideas of Hindu supremacy (*Hindutva*), faith in Vedic scriptures and practices, Aryan civilisation or culture, centralism, primacy of Executive, a common language (Hindi), vegetarianism, One Nation One Government, and *Kosovan chudhali*-like friendly business houses. The BJP under Mr Modi has made a deliberate break with the consensus that had prevailed until 2014.

The ensuing electoral battle in the three States will be between the Left-of-centre and the Right-of-centre political formations.

Kerala

The Congress-led UDF and the CPI(M)-led LDF have held sway during the last 50 years. The small parties have gravitated to one or the other bloc. Kerala's voters alternated between the UDF and the LDF but in 2021, they broke the pattern by re-electing the LDF which had won in 2016. Both Fronts are strong and have sharpened their electoral strategies. The popular view is that the LDF has ruled for two terms under the ageing Mr

The electoral battle in Kerala, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal will be between the Left-of-centre and the Right-of-centre political formations. The performance of each party will cast a halo or a shadow on its fortunes. It is especially so for the BJP that is considered alien to the two regions' political and social ethos

Pinarayi Vijayan, and it is time for change. The inept response of the LDF government to the floods (2018) and the Wayanad landslide (2024) has severely damaged the LDF. The Congress has many capable and relatively younger leaders, and is confident of the UDF winning a comfortable majority.

Tamil Nadu

The DMK-led front of 2021 and 2024 is intact — and Mr M K Stalin has prevailed upon smaller parties to contest on the DMK's symbol. The strategy will prevent the dilution of votes. The AIADMK-led front has suffered erosion of votes since the elections of 2012 (Assembly) and 2024 (LS), but has garnered the support of AMMK, a splinter group of AIADMK. Ironically, a month ago, the AMMK had sworn to never accept Mr E. Palaniswamy as the leader of the AIADMK or the CM face of the alliance!

What does the BJP bring to the AIADMK's table? Centrality, power of the central government; resources; EC's tacit support; and the divisive rhetoric of BJP's national leaders. Those factors did not work in 2021 and 2024, and may not work in 2026 too.

The BJP is contesting 27 (out of 234 seats) and the speculation on how many seats it will win ranges from the low single digit to 10. Because of the presence of Tamilaga

Vetri Kazhagam (TVK, founded by Mr Joseph Vijay) and Naam Tamizhar Katchi (headed by a trenchant critic of all political parties) — and their capacity to split votes — the election in each constituency will be close but the overall outcome will be in favour of one front. Poll observers and veteran journalists assess that the DMK-led alliance will be voted back to power.

West Bengal

It is practically a straight fight between the ruling TMC and the challenger BJP. The ruling parties of yesteryears, the Congress and CPI(M), are expected to train their fire on the BJP but are not expected to affect the ultimate result. The battle is fiercely joined between the perennial warrior, Ms Mamata Banerjee, and the persistent challengers, Messrs Modi & Shah. The contest goes beyond the political and has become physical, raw and visceral. It has stirred the passions of the people of West Bengal to defend their culture, literature, language, ethos, communal harmony, patriotism, and reverence for their icons such as Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and Amartya Sen. If BJP gains pride and self-esteem prevail, Ms Banerjee and her party will triumph for the fourth time in a row.

The three states are outside the Hindi heartland. The performance of each party will cast a halo or a shadow on the fortunes of the party. It is especially so for the BJP that is considered alien to the two regions' political and social ethos.

Hard times call for hard decisions



FIFTH COLUMN
BY TAVLEEN SINGH

THESE ARE difficult days and judging by President Trump's speech last week, there are many more difficult days ahead. Learned economists are warning of a world recession. Every country is adrift without a paddle in a dark, stormy ocean. This is why it worries me that our Prime Minister seems to be doing no more than attend meetings between campaigning for the coming state elections. He is aware that things could get worse before they get better and has tried to warn people of this, but what puzzles me is why he is not doing more. Why, for instance, is he not using this scarily alarming crisis to order his government to reduce spending on itself?

Let me recount two anecdotes to illustrate what I mean by this. Last week I was in a car in Delhi when sirens started to blare from behind us. Having once had the terrifying experience of taking a seriously ill person to hospital in an ambulance that remained unresponsively stuck in traffic, I asked my driver to let the ambulance pass. He said, 'It isn't an ambulance... it is some minister's conveyance.' By then the noise of sirens had gotten so shrill that other cars had all moved aside to let the cavalcade pass. I counted seven to ten cars. Why does a minister, even an important cabinet minister, need to use so many cars during a severe fuel crisis?

The second anecdote comes from a friend's daughter's wedding. It was a glamorous, glitzy event attended by many high officials and grandees. As I was leaving this wedding party, I noticed the son of a cabinet minister emerging from a cluster of expensive cars. With the Strait of Hormuz still almost closed, it is right for the spoils progeny of our political leaders to be travelling in ministerial cavalcades? Is it not time for the Prime Minister to put his foot down?

It has been my dubious privilege to cover politics and governance in Delhi for nearly half a century and witnessing how 'security' became an excuse for ministers to measure their pomp by the number of cars filled with security men that they can commandeer. When they arrive at five-star hotels, these ministers preen and prowl their way into the lobby making sure that everyone notices how big their cavalcade is. I also remember those days when Jawaharlal Nehru travelled through the streets of Delhi in a single shabby ambassador car. It is true that there are now serious threats to some ministers but why is it not possible for them to travel in one car with their security men seated in it with them?

This column has crusaded passionately over the years for kicking our politicians and bureaucrats out of the Lutens bungalows they occupy at enormous cost to taxpayers. Reliable estimates reveal that they spend more than Rs 50 crore just on housing. If you add the free electricity, telephones, servants, gardeners and maintenance that we pay for, the cost would be more than Rs 100 crore a year. We are, as I have pointed out before in this space, the only democratic country that provides official housing to the 'servants of the people.' May I suggest that their salaries be increased and that they be given an allowance for rent. And that the Government of India start making commercial use of Lutens Delhi. A single house sells for between Rs 150 and 200 crore. There are plenty of rich Indians who would happily buy property in this most exclusive enclave.

On the war I shall say only that it infuriated me to hear Donald Trump say in his speech last week that he was ready to bomb Iran into the stone age where it belongs'. To say this about a country that has a civilisation that goes back 7000 years shows not just deplorable ignorance but conceit of the worst kind. Having said this, may I add that the Ayatollahs and their cohorts did a great deal to trample on the civilisation of ancient Persia and impose Islam in its ugliest form.

When I hear Indian Muslims rant and rave against Donald Trump for harming a country that was civilised thousands of years before civilisation came to Europe, it makes me angry because I wish they had noticed the harm done by the Ayatollahs to ancient Persia's magnificent civilisation.

These are things to discuss later. Today we in India need to demand that our political leaders do more to tighten their belts. If the world economy falls into recession, then India will be more affected than most countries because of the fragility of our economy and because we have not done as much as China for energy security. China has enough green energy to keep around 20 per cent of its economy running at the worst of times. If we had built huge reservoirs of wind and solar power, we would be in a happier position.

But there is nothing like a crisis to jolt our political leaders into action and when the Prime Minister next convenes a meeting with chief ministers, we must hope that he urges them to find greater ways to run state economies. He himself needs to ensure that his ministers no longer travel in cavalcades they do not need. Or live like princes in palatial bungalows that cost much more than taxpayers should pay for their servants.

Panama Papers, piercing the veil of secrecy



HISTORY HEADLINE
BY JAY MAZOOMDAAR

A CRYPTIC eight-word message received by a German reporter 11 years ago would go on to change the face of collaborative journalism in the world.

"Hello. This is John Doe. Interested in data?"

The subsequent leak of 11.5 million internal records of Panamanian law firm Mossack Fonseca by an anonymous whistleblower brought together a coalition of 37 journalists from 109 media organisations in 80 countries on a single platform hosted by International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ).

In July 2015, the Panama Papers investigation was launched to map the offshore footprints of the rich and powerful who were looking for financial security. Ten months on, in April 2016, its findings would shake the world.

The long list of names found in the 2.6 terabytes of data included serving presidents (UAE and Ukraine), former presidents (Argentina and Sudan), serving prime ministers (Ireland), former prime ministers (Pakistan, Iraq, Ukraine, Jordan and Moldova), a former emir (Qatar) and a king (Saudi Arabia).

The investigation also exposed offshore dealings of Russian President Putin's close aides, the brother-in-law of China's Xi Jinping, children of former Pakistan PM Nawaz Sharif, former British PM Margaret Thatcher, and members of the Spanish royal family.

A second tranche of Mossack Fonseca data leaked in 2017 showed how the edifice they had set up in 1977 collapsed rapidly in the aftermath of the Panama Papers investigation.

The India chapter

A three-member team of *The Indian Express*, along with another 22 reporters, conducted the Panama Papers investiga-



To identify those named in the data, *The Indian Express* team visited nearly 300 addresses across the country.

tion in India. To identify those named in the data, *The Indian Express* team visited nearly 300 addresses across the country.

The Indian government set up a special multi-agency group to investigate the Panama Papers findings. Until now, 426 cases have been investigated, 94 seizures conducted and prosecution moved in 46 instances. So far, the probe has identified undeclared assets worth Rs 20,078 crore — of this, Rs 13,800 crore have been brought to tax.

Modus Operandi

Secrecy and low- or zero-taxation make offshore tax havens — such as the Cayman Islands, British Virgin Islands, Seychelles and Panama — attractive. It costs a few hundred dollars to set up an offshore entity — available off-the-shelf or can be registered in just 48 hours through a registered agent, such as Mossack Fonseca.

An offshore entity does not need natural persons as directors or shareholders. Often corporate service providers, or their staff, fill in as dummy office bearers. The real beneficiary or owner remains unnamed.

Some of Mossack Fonseca's Indian clients floated offshore entities at a time when this was illegal; some bunched their annual quota of remittances to buy shares in an offshore entity acquired at an earlier date. Some of these clients opened foreign bank accounts to park pay-offs in government contracts or illegal trade — at times to buy property through trusts or foundations.

What it meant

A thin line — or "the thickness of a prison wall" — separates tax evasion, which is outright illegal, and tax avoidance, which may not be.

Companies are free to structure finances in whichever way they wish to reduce tax liability and tax avoidance is a legitimate offshore advantage. A company is also protected by what is known as 'corporate veil' and the regulator is not supposed to fish for evidence of suspected wrongdoing.

Only if a fraud is established can the regulator pierce the corporate veil, since fraud unweaves everything — even a law, if it comes in the way — because no legislature intends to guard fraud.

That is where the Panama Papers investigation proved to be a game changer. In their sheer size and scope, the revelations enabled the regulators in India and across the world to step in and lift the veil of secrecy.

The writer is Associate Editor, *The Indian Express*

The ties that bind



ON THE LOOSE
BY LEHER KALA

A marriage breaking up or siblings fighting doesn't shock anyone. The parent/child bond is the only one expected to endure for a lifetime which is perhaps why we see it as shattering, or shameful, when it frays. Interestingly, in the West, the parents are cast as the villains; alienation has become a weapon wielded by adult children to punish them for the wounds they've carried around for decades. The truth is, it's far easier to break off contact than to have a difficult conversation. To some extent, that's how we all deal with the unpleasant people in our personal and professional lives — anticipating the negative effect of communication, a shut down often seems the better option. Except, a parent isn't a mere friend or colleague. Even if a brutal severance is necessary, an explanation, not abrupt silence, is the least the most intimate of bonds deserves.

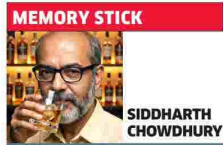
In the East, it's the young adults who bear the brunt of judgment when families fracture. Though it certainly seems that

these estrangements are more common than they used to be, there's simply more conversation about it thanks to Reddit and Instagram. A Brooklyn Beckham or Angelina Jolie cutting off ties with a parent is analysed ad nauseam online, emboldening others to share their stories. Now, cutting ties with a family member, far from being the last option, is hailed as a radically brave act, for discarding role expectations and prioritising one's own feelings first. Thanks to social media, one can be fooled into believing that we have large networks to keep loneliness at bay. But generally, the truly precious relationships are only a handful. An old school friend or a sibling is invaluable because they're the only ones who know exactly where you come from. The extraordinary influence of parents in our initial years, good or bad, shapes our personalities. Rejecting them is rejecting a part of ourselves.

The writer is director, *Hutkay Films*

How Patna Pegs People to Become Darudevils, Making Safe Drinking Prohibitory

Since 2016, Bihar's Al Capones have been bootlegging away like there's no excise, with ameer admi sipping away his secret stash, while his aam counterpart is left with potential poison



SIDDHARTH CHOWDHURY

MEMORY STICK
My *chacha-in-law* is a robust 77-year-old two years older than the teetotaling (outgoing) CM and soon to be Rajya Sabha member Nitish Kumar. For half a century, he has ended his day with a glass of whisky — my uncle-in-law, that is, not Nitish. He lives in Patna, where since April 2016, Bihar has enforced strict prohibition. Since then, he claims he drinks only on holidays, safely outside the state. I take that with a pinch of chopped adrak. Like many whisky lovers in Patna, I hope he still indulges when a bootlegger comes his way. The secrecy, I suspect,

heightens the pleasure. Especially knowing the next downfall could be months away or never.

In just a decade, the Patna gallant's easy swagger has given way to a perpetual, over-the-shoulder furtiveness. Once relaxed in demeanour, he is now markedly irritable. Bihar's prohibition laws, far harsher than the relatively benign regimes in Gujarat and Mizoram, have reshaped everyday life. As Mohan Lal Gonkar wrote in his 1982 espionage novel, *Bandicoot Run*, recalling 1960s Maharashtra: 'If you lived in a state under prohibition, you trespassed your whisky.'

About a month ago, I was in Patna and went for a morning walk in Sanjay Gandhi Jaivik Udyan. There, I was delighted to encounter an old acquaintance — the Patna common man — in his oversized white kurta-pyjama and black Powerloggers. I asked, 'What are the rates these days?' For home delivery, a 750 ml bottle of **** costs ₹2,450 in Patna. A minimum order of 6 bottles, **** costs ₹14,000 and **** costs ₹4,000. 'Why only **** brands?' I asked. His answer: 'There's better quality control with



BOOTLEGGER BABUA

them. You would never go blind imbibing them.'

Patna is a discerning market with many jagrat customers. But even so, rates are staggering. Bottles of rum and gin are so rare that they were worth their weight in

gold. In some instances, the cost of a bottle of whisky increased four times its MRP. In Gurgon, I buy 3 bottles of **** at ₹1,900 from an L-I outlet.

While prohibition has been a bane for many middle- and upper-class women —

More than a few 'white houses' have risen on Patna's outskirts on proceeds made by contraband alcohol

household budgets stretched by their husbands' drinking habits — it has been a boon for Bihar's present and Al Capones, Louis Buchalters and Jack Kennedys. According to my common man, more than a few 'white houses' have risen on Patna's outskirts over the past decade on such proceeds.

'Well, it seems simpler just to smuggle in a bottle next time I'm in Patna,' I said. 'Bhai, that's what everyone does. I bring in two bottles of **** each time I visit Delhi. Aatachi mein kasla hai.'

While the middle and upper classes in Patna imbibe their **** and **** Labels, what of the less well-off? After all, prohibition was enforced to protect them from the evils of overdrinking. For the financially strapped, as hoch tradegies suggest, things have gone from bad to worse.

It is said that consumption of marijuana and opium has risen. For the poor,

deaths and methanol blindings will continue even without prohibition, elsewhere the cash-strapped, at least, need a choice: whether to risk their lives or not. Choice matters.

If the Bihar government truly cares about public health, it should ensure sales of quality liquor at reasonable prices through official outlets. Perhaps even set up distilleries of its own, generating jobs and revenue. Imperial Magadh, distilled from pure Patna ganjajali, has a certain ring as a potential homegrown single malt. Then, the next time I'm in Patna, I could buy a bottle and share it with my chacha-in-law in the evening. Without feeling like a raging socialist.



INDRAJIT HAZRA

Yes, More Space, But Why Shrink From Shrinking?

Smaller bodies, smaller appetites, smaller bills — now for the nano-tech

'There is no Planet B,' goes the bumper sticker. But the absence of Planet B at our perusal is a kind of built-in excuse for how we've trashed Planet A. And I'm not even a tree-hugger.

So, when I followed — with my eyes on the NASA website, not in an Ola — Artemis II on its 10-day mission carrying 4 astronauts on a lunar flyby mission on what was still April Fool's Day, I was keenly aware that humans were going to space beyond the immediate neighbourhood of the International Space Station, after more than 53 years. I have aged since Apollo 17, the last crewed mission, landed on the Moon, and never mind interplanetary travel, we don't even have flying cars yet.

Artemis 2, unlike Apollo 17, isn't primarily about a space race, even as China's Lan'yue mission is slated to land taikonauts on the lunar surface by 2030. (India's crewed space mission is currently unshelved.) It's about getting serious about finding Planet B — for resources, and, in the long run, to settle above Earth's best of luck with that, there is another way we could conceivably lengthen our resources, and better our stay on Planet A.

While Lemuel Gulliver in Jonathan Swift's 1726 satirical novel, *Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World in Four Parts*, later simply known as *Gulliver's Travels*, found both Lilliput, where people were less than 6-in-tall, and Brobdingnag, whose citizens averaged 70-ft tall, to be progressive and without any resource crunch, it sees the 1700s. Pre-Industrial Revolution pollution was minimal, and the population must have been even less than today's Europe with its low birth rate, and numbers pruned by immolation. Eco, the vast difference in consumption and output between Gulliver's micro and mega hosts didn't really matter.

But being Lilliputians — significantly small humans — in today's growing, belching, creaking world would significantly reduce intake of resources: less energy, less food, less space. With Earth remaining the same size, there would be more to go around.

Liu Cixin, China's grandmaster of speculative fiction and author of the *Remembrance of Earth's Past* trilogy that starts with the 2008 novel, 'The Three-Body Problem', has mused how shrinking humans would shrink consumption. A 15-cm adult would need a rice

EC Loves Me, EC Loves Me Not, EC Loves Me...

When a dedicated democrat doesn't find herself on the SIR rolls, it's truly heartbreaking — and worth a longwinded whine



RAJYASREE SEN

SEN & SENSIBILITY
All my plans of participating in the voting process in the largest democracy in the world — well, at least in one of the states of the largest democracy in the world — came to a halt this week when I logged onto EC's website. I entered my EPIIC — Electors Photo Identification Card, no relation to Op Epic Fury — number, which I've used since the last 25 years. But I was nowhere to be found. I had been wiped off the electoral rolls.

Could it be because I am 75%, Bangal — Bengalis originally from East Bengal, now Bangladesh? Were the names of Nobel laureate Amartya Sen, and self-anointed noblesse oblige Rajyasree Sen, finally going to be muttered with the same empathy and pathos? The reason behind this wiping out of my enfranchising existence and suffragatory history has to do with the fact that my voting state is West Bengal, which goes to the polls this month. And SIR is out in full force, weeding out 'Bangladeshi infiltrators.' So what if there's some collateral damage to people like me? Bangalis — literally borderline Bengali Indians — must be ferreted out.

I was born in Calcutta. I finished my

graduation in the city and worked there. My permanent residence has always been Calcutta/Kolkata. Eight years back, when I tried to change my permanent address on my voter ID to Delhi, I couldn't. Because it was too much for the election website to process with hanging multiple times. Then Covid struck. And now here I am. That EC didn't even deem me worthy enough to deserve a 'Dear Janya' letter. Or in the age of Digital India, worthy of a WhatsApp, SMS, or email. It's heartbreaking. It's not that EC doesn't

know where to reach me. They have my PAN and Aadhaar card, both linked to my phone number. But I'm assuming that we are trying to boost the efficacy of the near-extinct postal service and are only sending SIR notices by small mail. And Kolkata being Kolkata, my SIR letter was probably thrown away when the postman came across a locked gate.

Never have I looked for validation with as much fervour as I have looked for my name on past electoral rolls. The poll panel has uploaded electoral

rolls from 2002. But I am nowhere to be found. I have scoured through roll after roll — and was happy to spot the petrol — and was happy to spot the petrol — but my name. Could it be that I referred to the dingy, poorly ventilated Kharapur Girls School Room 4, every 5 years since the 2011 West Bengal assembly elections to cast my vote — only to be cast aside by SIR?

I even tried spelling permutations and combinations of my name. After all, even if my EPIIC number wasn't picked up, my name should be. But EC website does have a disclaimer: 'Spelling of names may vary between last SIR details and current details in 2025, hence if you do not find output with exact name then try different variations of names. For example, for Maneechals try Manish. A name by any other name can still be that name. I did appreciate the use of 'hence'.

What hurts more is that I never have I committed to a relationship more than the one I had with the electoral process. Even when I earned a pilot's licence, I travelled to Kolkata from wherever state I was in, to cast my vote. I have stood in queues, in smelly, humid rooms, all in the hope of seeing the candidate I love win — and love me back. The electoral process has turned out to be an unappreciative lover.

But maybe this is a blessing in disguise. Now, instead of heralding change at the state level, I can herald change in Delhi, whenever I get a voter ID again. Vive revolution! But only after I get a new voter ID registered. So, vive revolution after a while.

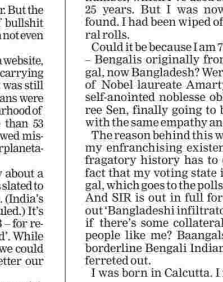
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ROLL CALL FROM SIR, WITH LOVE

Let's Talk About...



Love Story

At the poor star-crossed lovers. (Sigh) I hate to ask it. But now what happened?

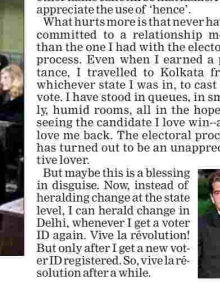
I was just feeling sad for the tragic love story of Carolyn Bessette and John F. Kennedy Jr.

And why are we talking about them? All courtesy Ryan Murphy's 9-part limited series *Love Story* that reimagines one of America's most mythologised couples. This week, Disney+ confirmed *Love Story* is now the most streamed drama in the platform's history. According to FX, social media searches for JFK Jr. and Bessette grew by more than 9,000% in the past month.

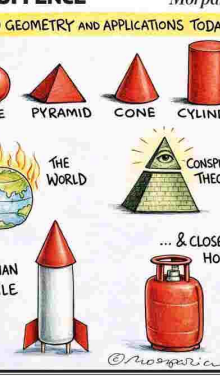
Wow! But what's so special about the couple? Their courtship has long functioned as modern American folklore. Camelot's heir married a Calvin Klein publicist, Manhattan as backdrop, and finally, tragedy sealing the myth. The show traces their first encounters to their secret wedding and relentless media scrutiny. Though called

what happens when two individuals become a national fixation.

NO OFFENCE



3-D GEOMETRY AND APPLICATIONS TODAY



Hormuz, Horn, Houthis, Hezbollah, Hamas... Who?

Since the war in West Asia began, everyone's a geography or geopolitical expert

know it. You can't read, or hear of, a single mention of the Strait without being informed about that omnipresent 20%. It's like those applications for a sarkari clerkship in which the applicant furnishes qualifications for the same: '10th Standard Pass, by Grace of God.'

Sometimes a single news report will mention that 20% more than once to ensure we're all getting that number right, and, through a momentary bout of amnesia, don't misremember it to be 19.5% on weekdays and 21% on weekends.

What's that? You don't pronounce the D as in Djokovic? Similarly, should we refer to Djibouti as 'Booty'? Considering that that term means plunder and, part of the human anatomy called 'tiss'.

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JUGULAR VEIN



JUG SURAIYA
Q: What do Romantic poet Byron and the Strait of Hormuz have in common?

A: Like Byron, the Strait of Hormuz could claim that it once topped up one morning to find itself famous. Byron gained overnight celebrity status in 1812 when the first print run of his poem, 'Childe Harold's Pilgrimage' was sold out in 3 days.

The Strait gained overnight fame as a result of an infamy, depending on one's point of view — on February 28, after the US and Israel attacked Iran, which responded by imposing a blockade of the strategically crucial waterway that links the Persian Gulf with the Gulf of Oman.

Prior to these events, few beyond West Asia had heard of the Strait of Hormuz, Strait of Hormuz? 'Who's Hormuz, and why is it such a big deal that he's not gay? Not straight, but straight? Ok. So, what dire strat is the fellow in? Financial? Unfriended on Facebook?

All that has changed, changed overnight, and a terrible duty is born. Today, it's our collective duty to be *au courant* and in the loop of 'CURRENT AFFAIRS' to know all there is to know. And then to know some more, about the 50-odd-km-long stretch of water that affords passage to 20% of all global oil and LPG shipments, and which is not only pivotal to the international economy, but also to fossil-fuel-driven civilisation as we

know it. You can't read, or hear of, a single mention of the Strait without being informed about that omnipresent 20%. It's like those applications for a sarkari clerkship in which the applicant furnishes qualifications for the same: '10th Standard Pass, by Grace of God.'

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HO, HO, HO, WEST ASIA EXPERTS!



When I grow up I wanna be a Merc'. Geography is said to have been invented by Eratosthenes of Cyrene (c. 276-194 BCE), the librarian-in-chief in Alexandria, who measured Earth's circumference with uncanny precision, and segmented the planet by devising a grid of latitude and longitude, earning him the title of 'Father of Geography'.

In that the entire concept of geography, and of geopolitics, is being radically reinvented, a modified version of that appellation might be accorded to that 'Don of Dons', the 'Capodi Capri', as the 'Godfather of Neo-geography', with a marginal PS for his trusty PA who supplies the footnotes, Bibi.

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Being a city boy whose imagination was mostly fed by adventure stories, I was fascinated by the idea of climbing a tree to pick fruit. So when I discovered that the house we were visiting had a line of guava trees in the garden laden with fruit, I really had no choice. Guava trees tend to branch out quite early, so it was barely a climb to get to one of the boughs that were, so it seemed, bending down with the weight of the fruits they were carrying. Then it was just a matter of sliding on my butt a few feet down the bough, and I was there, or so I thought, when I noticed some movements along my bare legs: there was a parade of robust-looking red ants heading straight inside my shorts. I won't speak to you about the ants, except that my mother was astounded by how fast I ran across the lawn towards the nearest toilet. And I learnt that guava trees house red ants who, when disappointed in their colony, can't say what they were hoping to find — bite. Hard.

Abhijit Banerjee
TASTING ECONOMICS

I still love guavas. Especially those we call *dansha* in Bangla, at the cusp of ripeness which does sound vaguely obscene. Sweet and sour with a hint of acid, a burst of freshness, a light bulb that lights up inside your mouth, great in chutneys and salads. Full of vitamins, combining lots of fibre and a low glycaemic index, and more surprisingly perhaps, a good source of iron (especially the pink ones). Apparently, the fact that they are a source of vitamin C elevates our body's ability to absorb the iron: a 2024 randomised controlled trial, by a long list of authors led by Varsha Rani from Chaudhary Charan Singh Haryana Agricultural University, finds that 6-10 year olds who were fed moong dal with guava for their school lunch over a seven-month period were 50% less likely to suffer from anaemia than those who got just moong dal.

This is important, even very important, because there are two billion people with anaemia in the world, and India has the highest. In nearly 90% of women and children and more than 30% of males are anemic by the now accepted global norms. We have a higher fraction of anemic people than Bangladesh or Pakistan.

WHY GUAVAS IS SO RARE

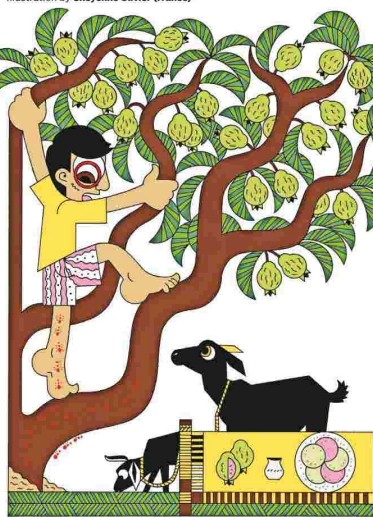
Illustration by Cheyenne Olivier (France)

more in the range of countries much poorer than us. Despite guavas being crisp, delicious and easy to pick (as long as you mind the ants).

The wide prevalence of anemia might make it seem innocuous, but that would be a mistake. First, because according to the most recent round of the National Family Health Survey (NFHS), more than 50 million children are reported as severely anemic, a debilitating and sometimes life-threatening condition that interferes with both physical growth and intellectual development. Moreover, among those under three, 9% are severely anemic, which puts them at risk of impaired brain development.

As people become less poor, they start eating like the elites — more paneer and less meat or foraged greens — which could be partly why anemia has risen

Second, anemia in pregnant women is dangerous for both the child and the mother. According to a recent article in *Lancet Global Health*, severely anemic women are seven times more likely to bleed to death on the birthing table than moderately anemic ones, and while severe anemia is relatively common, my calculation is that about three lakh such women give birth every year, and a significant number of them die. But even mildly anemic people suffer. Anemia reduces blood hemoglobin levels, and hemoglobin transports the oxygen that reinvigorates muscles. As a result, anemic people get tired sooner. In the early 2000s, a team including Duncan Thomas, who is a friend and a professor of economics at Duke University, carried out a large-scale (17,000 participants) study in central Java of what hap-



pens when working-age people, mostly farmers and labourers, take iron supplements. The study population was not particularly anemic — less than 8% of men were even moderately anemic, significantly below current Indian rates. Yet even in this population of marginally anemic people, iron supplementation increased productivity. The men slept less and worked more days. Earnings went up by 15%. That could be a lot of money for India as a whole, given the prevalence.

Unfortunately, at least in India, the problem is not solving the problem. As a result, anemic people in India, anemia rates went up between 2015-16 and 2019-21. It is true that the magnitudes are large enough to be concerning. For adolescent girls, the national average went from 54%

like the elites — more paneer and less meat or foraged greens — which could be partly why anemia has risen. Bangladeshis and Pakistanis eat more red meat than us, and red meat is, alas, the source of the kind of iron that the body absorbs readily (live, in particular, is a great source of iron, though I always resisted my mother's attempt to sneak it into my diet), which might explain why they do slightly better.

Now I'm not about to suggest that vegetarians switch to eating red meat: for one, Cheyenne, whose drawings define these columns, would walk out on me (she is a vegetarian). But it is true that vegetarians find it harder to get enough iron: even when plants have lots of iron, that iron is not easily absorbed. To get enough iron from eating red meat is probably means moving quite far from the *alu-paneer-dahi-dal-chawal-rice* diet that seems to be taking over North India's vegetarians. It troubles me that in the vegetarian's not like the salt and stopped using it before it could have much of an impact. They claimed that it tasted bad (we couldn't taste the difference) and that it made the food turn dark (which it did). However, we sensed that they were also not convinced of its benefits — the only villages where people continue to buy DFS by subsidising the price and improving access to it.

The study found some impact on anemia among adolescents, but the households really did not like the salt and stopped using it before it could have much of an impact. They claimed that it tasted bad (we couldn't taste the difference) and that it made the food turn dark (which it did). However, we sensed that they were also not convinced of its benefits — the only villages where people continue to buy DFS by subsidising the price and improving access to it.

This is why WHO and many experts push for the fortification of staples like rice, wheat or salt with iron (and nutrients that support the absorption of iron). The government of India has also broadly accepted this idea for some years now. However, we still lack evidence that these fortified staples can be delivered at scale without losing much of their benefits. Especially in the hot and humid climate of much of India. And even if delivery is possible, will consumers want them?

In the early 2010s, the government started mandating that government school lunches be cooked with Double Fortified Salt (DFS), salt with both iron and iodine added. To understand how much it helps with anemia, we implemented a study in Bihar. Households in randomly chosen villages were encouraged to buy DFS by subsidising the price and improving access to it.

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Unfortunately changing diets is hard, as all of us who tried at some point to reshape our bodies have experienced. It is India, most restaurants offer just a couple of vegetable dishes, perhaps an egg-plant bharta and a navratan korma? And though I will eat eggs in any form, it contains *astaxanthin*, which makes it harder for the body to absorb iron.

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GUAVA RECIPES



Peruchi Koshimbir (Spiced Guava Salad): Soak 1/4 cup dill in water for 30 mins. Drain and mix with 1/2 cups finely diced cucumber and carrots. 1 cup finely diced firm, almost ripe, guava. 1 green chili, very finely sliced and 2 tablespoons finely chopped cilantro. Dress with 1 tablespoon lemon juice and 1/2 tsp salt. Finish with a chaunk of 1/2 tsp mustard seeds, 1 sprig of curry leaves and a pinch of hing in 1 tsb oil.

Guava raita: Grate 3 ripe (but not too soft), seeded guavas (1 cup). Mix with 1 cup not too sour-yogurt. 1 tsp roasted and ground cumin seeds, 1/2 tsp degli mirch, 1/2 tsp salt, 1/4 tsp sugar, and 1/4 cup roasted and broken walnut kernels.



in school meals and the public distribution system. However, establishing a reliable supply chain and a quality testing infrastructure for fortified rice has proved difficult, and recently the government has suspended its use in the public system.

This might be the right time to revisit persuasion. There are supposedly traditional varieties of rice that can deliver much more iron to the body than the now most common breeds. If this is true — it will need rigorous testing — creating markets for those varieties could be an important element of the strategy, especially since it reaches the more affluent groups who do not use the public schools or the PDS, but are almost as afflicted by anemia as the rest. And somewhere in the process, we should tell people about guavas.

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

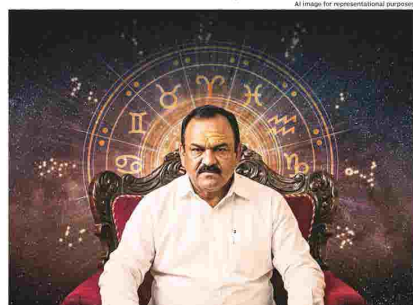
Inside Captain Baba's web of lies

Gitesh Shelke, Govind Vijaykumar, Abhilash Botekar & Santosh Sonawane | TNW

How a Nashik astrologer built a 30-acre empire using black magic threats, plastic snakes, and 'energised' seeds to abuse women, defraud businessmen

In a mango farm in a village near Nashik, a well became the unlikely stage for a carefully designed miracle. Here, police say, astrologer Ashok Kharat drew followers to remote-controlled plastic snakes emerging from concealed pipes on amavasya (new moon) nights to convince people he had supernatural abilities and power over real reptiles. A few hundred metres away, behind a wall and an ornate gate, is his farmhouse, where officials suspect several women who came seeking advice and blessings were sexually abused.

The well, farmhouse, a nearby temple and an airplane hangar-sized ceremonial hall — all part of a 30-acre 'ashram' in Mirgaon, 60 km from Nashik — are now under scrutiny as police probe a man whose influence ran so deep that politicians, judges, businessmen paid crores for rituals in forests across continents.



SACRED GAME: At his Mirgaon ashram, Ashok Kharat drew followers, politicians, and the rich and powerful, even as whispers about him grew

Powering Through Fear
Kharat was arrested in March 17 after a woman alleged he repeatedly raped her over three years, from Nov

A school dropout who fled home after stealing his father's money, Kharat returned to Nashik around 2005 and reinvented himself as an 'astrologer' with the title 'Captain' to mask his past and build authority

2022 to Dec 2025, coercing her with sedative-laced 'salty bitter' concoctions disguised as 'holy water'. "He would tell women their loved ones would die or they'd become infertile if they complained," says Nashik police commissioner Santosh Sonawane. Kharat, who led the late-night arrest. Since then, two special investigation team (SIT) helicopters have received over 100 calls in three days from at least 15 women or their relatives alleging sexual harassment or obscene acts during 'rituals' meant to fix everything from health to finances. Police have registered 11 cases — eight linked to sexual assault and three to fraud. In one, a woman in the state assembly chief minister Devendra Fadnis urged victims to come forward. "No one who helped Ashok Kharat will be spared," he said last month. "There are disgusting allegations against this man," says Karnik. That disgust is visible among people who are being asked for directions to Kharat Baba's properties in Mirgaon and Nashik, where he ran a real-estate consultancy in Canada. Corner

sie of many alleged crimes, including one particularly heinous act, caught on a hidden camera, that purportedly shows him standing behind a woman and urinating into a cup. Over 50 such clips are now being analysed.

Investigators say the recordings came from within Kharat's circle — an office assistant who installed concealed cameras after alleging his pregnant wife was sexually assaulted during a visit. The footage is believed to have triggered the first serious breach in Kharat's carefully managed image, cultivated since his return to Nashik around 2004-05, when he presented himself as an 'astrologer' after a supposed stint in the merchant navy. A school dropout from Khandhawali village, he left home as a teen after failing Class 10 and allegedly fled with Rs 4,000 entrusted to him by his father. When he returned, he adopted the 'Captain' identity to build authority, says Karnik.

His influence grew after some early 'predictions' appeared to come true. Complainants told police he sold 'energised stones', polished wild tamarind seeds worth Rs 100 a kg and passed them off as 'sacred objects' priced between Rs 10,000 and Rs 1 lakh.

MODUS OPERANDI
Staged 'miracles': Used remote-controlled plastic snakes to convince followers he had supernatural powers
Fear factor: Invoked black magic, warning followers of death, infertility or financial ruin if questioned
'Blessed objects': Sold wild tamarind seeds as sacred items priced between ₹10,000-₹1 lakh
Rituals for the rich: Persuaded businessmen to fund costly 'rituals' in foreign countries
Behind closed doors: Women allege they were abused and raped after being given sedative-laced 'holy water' and later abortion pills

2024, Kharat used 'black magic' threats to force him to pay for trips to Myanmar, Greenland, Egypt and Bangladesh, as well as the construction of his farmhouse. Jastud said his association with Kharat — which began with a visit to the well with 'snakes' — cost him nearly Rs 5 crore, including a Rs 30 lakh men's chief minister. Kharat was arrested in 2013, when a trust set up by Kharat's organisation warned MANS members they would be "wiped out" if they continued their activism. The group protested again in 2022, when the chief minister, Kharat was arrested. He visited Kharat's temple in Mirgaon.

"The visit wasn't part of his official itinerary," says Chandgude. "Someone in a constitutional post should not be seen encouraging superstition." Shinde later said he was there only to offer prayers. Chandgude also alleges Kharat threatened them with a firearm during an early encounter: "The mention of a weapon has drawn attention to another line of inquiry — whether human sacrifice. Last month, the prosecution told a Nashik court that police had found a revolver and five spent cartridges at Kharat's Mirgaon farmhouse. "We want to know where he may have fired the rounds and why. There could be a possibility of human sacrifice," an SIT officer says.

Red Flags
Members of Dabholkar's Maharashtra Ardhshiksha Nirwaha Samiti (MANS) say Kharat first appeared on their radar in 2007, but they were unable to act as the law requires a victim complaint. "This really ties our hands," says MANS state secretary Krishna Chandgude. "We often trapped such individuals through stings, but the law now requires a victim complaint. Many don't come forward fearing reprisals."

He alleges several confrontations with Kharat. "A local reporter first told us about him in 2007," he says. "But when we went to challenge him, local industrialists and even officials tried to shield him." He recalls another encounter in 2013, when a trust set up by Kharat's organisation warned MANS members they would be "wiped out" if they continued their activism. The group protested again in 2022, when the chief minister, Kharat was arrested. He visited Kharat's temple in Mirgaon.

With inputs from Mohammed Akhef

Deepfake dadajis make it to the shaadi, thanks to AI

Mohua.Das@timesofindia.com

At first glance, it appears to be an ordinary wedding with shehnai in the background. But soon, the music dips into a large-scale light show, revealing a set of gates amidst the clouds. They part, and a staircase emerges. And then a familiar figure descends — someone deceased but now resident in wedding regalia, greeting family members, blessing the couple, sometimes even speaking. Across him, some guests are wearing AI animated deepfakes for resurrected deceased loved ones — also called deadbots or griebots — in wedding montages, or even conversational avatars in celebratory videos.



UNEXPECTED ARRIVAL: In the viral wedding video, an AI avatar of the deceased patriarch emerges through clouds, greeting everyone

In such videos, a sister brings back her brother to attend her wedding. The screen turns into a phone interface flashing 'calling bhau'. The frame zooms out as if connecting two worlds. Her brother walks in wearing a kurta, carrying a gift. Midway he morphs into wedding attire, dhoti and a shawl, at the sunset. His sister watches, crying, as the edit folds him into the celebration. Another shows a grandmother descending from the clouds to a family Kerala before walking in her daughter's home to cuddle and bless the bride and groom. The video clocks 23 million views. On social media, these clips are paired with reaction footage of guests wiping tears or covering their faces in a moment of disbelief. "That mix of spectacle and emotion has driven demand across the country, fuelled by the pandemic and the wedding boom," says the roots of this trend lie in the experimental corners of the internet. "We were recreating AI characters of famous politicians and actors who had passed away," says Trivandrum-based Abhil Vinyak.

In one video, a deceased brother dressed in wedding attire, walks into his sister's saree with a dhoti in hand

Until even a couple of years ago, working off a single photograph was a gamble. Now, even poor-quality, damaged or black-and-white photos can be cloned, with AI colour-corrected, and used. "We can even clone the original voice and get them to converse, which families find most enticing," says Vinyak. Pricing reflects how far families want to push the illusion. At one end, wedding photographers charge around Rs 6,000 for a minute-long video. More layered edits with video cloning can go up to Rs 50,000.

Boutique studios and freelance wedding photographers are mixing traditional editing and motion graphics with new software tools like Sora, Nano Banana and Midjourney. Wedding photographer Shubham Gupta in Aligarh stumbled into this service almost by accident last October and has made 30 such AI videos since. "I started with the idea, who gave me a photo of her grandmother-in-law who had passed away before they met, and wanted us to photoshop him into a family portrait. We realised maybe we could use AI to create a video of this moment." A few YouTube tutorials later, he first deepfaked his own face.

At the wedding, the screen flashed 'calling dadaji'. The call connected, and Dadaji — in pagri, kurta, waistcoat — emerged through clouds, blessing and hugging the family, even

speaking to them. Family members watching the scene broke down. "It was an emotional moment because it had only been six months since he had passed," recalls Sakshi Sharma in Gurgaon. "This together was so much about curiosity as it is about grief. "We get a lot of inquiries where people have never seen their grandparents except in photos," says Vinyak. "They want to see how they would look and behave if they came alive." Farlabad-based motion graphics designer Sachin Prajapati faced an unusual challenge when south Delhi's Twinkle Gupta requested an AI video of her late paternal grandparents and maternal grandfather for her parents' 25th anniversary. "We didn't even have proper photographs, just very old black-and-white pictures, mostly of their faces," she says. It meant building their avatars from scratch.

"The resulting face consistency is a challenge, but we can manage up to 90-95% now," Prajapati says. In the finished video, all three avatars come together to bless the couple, pose for a family portrait, and then disappear into the clouds. The experience took time to settle. "My parents went completely silent for the first 15 minutes before getting ready. It took them days, even months, to process it fully," Farhan Abbasi from Aligarh, who commissioned a recreation of his father for his brother's wedding, explains it was the moment better, but also heightened the absence. "My mother got very emotional. It brought back a lot of memories."

Since then, the video hasn't been revisited much. "What that sense of presence does beyond the emotional high is harder to pin down. The rise of AI simulations of the deceased also raises ethical questions around recreating someone without consent, worries clinical psychologist Radhika Papat. "The immense desire to what these may be as a form of closure. "It's a disruption of the natural mourning progression," she says, adding that in some cases, "it can also become pathological because it stops you from fully confronting the reality of bereavement." Part of the discomfort lies in how easily these recreations blur emotional boundaries. "People use grieftools like a hand-aid. But it's more like a drug. That false sense of comfort can unsettle the brain's adaptation and healing process," she says.

In Kerala, winner will be familiar but game may change

BIG MOOD

RAHUL VERMA

The key question in the 2026 Kerala assembly election is whether the state will return to its predictable cycle of power alternation, or whether voters will make history by electing the incumbent for a third consecutive time. For decades, Kerala's politics has largely been a contest between two coalitions — the CPM-led Left Democratic Front (LDF) and the Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF) — and these coalitions alternated office every five years. But the pattern changed with the LDF winning a second consecutive term in 2021. Before Pinarayi Vijayan, no Kerala CM had been in office for ten straight years.

How is Kerala likely to vote on April 27? Many observers have suggested that UDF has a clear edge as LDF faces 10 years of anti-incumbency. Also, UDF's performance in the 2021 LS election, in which the coalition won 18 of 20 seats (and had a vote-share lead of over 10 percentage points), along with its impressive performance in the 2025 local body polls, indicates that the Left may be heading for a defeat. However, the data suggests that it may not be as easy as it sounds.

First, UDF usually outperforms LDF in LS elections in the last three decades (except 2004). So, UDF sweeping the 2019 and 2024 LS polls in Kerala should be seen as part of a trend in which voters are more likely to vote for the Congress and its allies in national elections. This includes the LDF in 2024, a second time in Thiruvananthapuram, and registered impressive vote counts in many other seats. More recently, during the 2025 local body elections, it was able to win the Thiruvananthapuram mayoral election for the first time.

Rather than relying solely on its traditional Hindu district voters by adding a lot of uncertainty to predictable patterns of political mobilisation. Despite having some organisational presence, especially in more urban pockets, BJP has been a distant third pole so far. But its vote share has steadily increased in the past decade. It won the Thiruvananthapuram constituency in Thiruvananthapuram, and registered impressive vote counts in many other seats. More recently, during the 2025 local body elections, it was able to win the Thiruvananthapuram mayoral election for the first time.

This makes the 2026 assembly elections historic in the sense that, while the results next month may still produce a familiar outcome — an LDF or UDF govt — the path to that outcome could transform Kerala's political landscape.



BATTLE LINES: The state's bi-nodal politics and social development agendas obscure many schisms

state than any other face UDF may want to project. A victory for the Left Front in Kerala is existential after being completely routed in West Bengal and Tripura. (UDF) continues to anchor its dominance. Southern Kerala, with a more Hindu population, has largely voted for LDF and Central Kerala, which is socially more diverse, has been the real battlefield. LDF has largely drawn its support among the Hindu voters, rural and lower income. UDF has long relied on a consolidated Muslim-Christian social coalition. The increasing consolidation of Muslim voters in favour of Congress, is likely to push counter-polarisation among the Christians and Hindus in certain pockets.

It is here that an insurgent BJP may be a headache for both coalitions by adding a lot of uncertainty to predictable patterns of political mobilisation. Despite having some organisational presence, especially in more urban pockets, BJP has been a distant third pole so far. But its vote share has steadily increased in the past decade. It won the Thiruvananthapuram constituency in Thiruvananthapuram, and registered impressive vote counts in many other seats. More recently, during the 2025 local body elections, it was able to win the Thiruvananthapuram mayoral election for the first time.

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Verma is Fellow at the Centre for Policy Research (CPR), New Delhi. Views expressed are personal

Not a question of black or white, but whether I was good enough on court

When former cricketer Laxman Sivaramakrishnan stepped down from the BCCI commentary panel, citing concerns over colourism and unequal opportunity, it reopened an uncomfortable conversation around bias in Indian sport. For tennis icon Vijay Amritraj, that is familiar territory. In an interview with Prajwal Hegde, he reflects on navigating prejudice, his mother's influence, and the contrasting personalities of Alcaraz and Sinner

■ Have you experienced discrimination for your skin colour? Some commentators have said they don't like me. I'm not quite sure if that entails a colour, race or religion bar. It seems like, hey, I don't like you for whatever reason, but the greatest thing about sport has been the quality of merit. I don't know about this particular case (Sivaramakrishnan).

It's hard to imagine someone was left out of the first set of an interview segment because of his colour. The quality of commentary, presentation, coming back with immediate reaction to the player's answers is a talent on its own. Not every great player has become a good commentator or presenter. It is hard for me to think of it that way but the sad part is, if he did go through something, it can affect you personally. I certainly feel for him. It does things to you internally that a lot of us won't know. The question is, how do you get out of it? It is not only your profession, your bread and butter, but it is also a game that you love.

■ How does one get over a bias like that? Let me try to explain it with an anecdote. I was playing a tournament in New Hampshire (New England) in 1973. Rod Laver and Jimmy Connors were playing too. First, tennis was a white sport (back then), second-

by the entire hotel, where the tournament was held, was full of elderly white Americans. Dinner at night was a coat-and-tie event. I was 19 and wasn't able to wear coats and ties consistently so I would come down for dinner in a Madras shirt, jeans and kolhapuri chappals. As I walked across, I felt the eyes of the room pierce the back of my head.

Then, I won on Monday. Tuesday was the quarters I beat Laver after being down several match points. In the final, I ended up playing Connors, who had me 2-5 in the third set, with two match points. There were about 8,000 people in that beautiful setting, all white, and I would say only two in the crowd were for Connors. I ended up winning, and when I came for dinner that evening, several of the people in the room were wearing chappals. I draw that analogy for the simple reason that there are lots of things that can overcome by the way you are and the way you're able to think in the minds of people and what they like to believe.

■ What did that 19-year-old tell himself when he looked in the mirror on all those evenings in New Hampshire? Coat-and-tie was the expectation, it was my fault that I didn't have it.

That's economics, right? You know, where you come from, the way you are, and the belief you have in yourself, the

dreams that get you this far. You're coming from the late-60s, early-70s Madras to a world that you are not exposed to at all. Then to go there and compete with the best without having anything of what they grew up with... That's what sports taught me, that you can compete at the highest level, because I'm good enough to do that. It wasn't a question of whether I was black or white, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, but whether I was good enough.

■ Did you feel the colour of your skin more in India than you did outside?

The honest answer to that would probably be, if I did, I didn't know it. My mother used to always tell us, don't ever complain, just make sure that you're the best. So, in '72 on Christmas Day, when I won the Nationals for the first time beating Ramakrishnan (Kishan) in Kolkata, and Anand (Amritraj) and I won the doubles, and my younger brother, Ashok, won the juniors all on the same day, it didn't matter what colour or religion or language you spoke. I think moon's words are very relevant.

My mother was that wonderfully ordinary person who would get things with my life. How do people like that get the opportunity to tell a child who wasn't good enough that you have to be good enough to be able to do this? So, I think, yes, I'm sure it was there at some point in my life. I was focused on being the best in what we were doing.

■ What did you make of Carlos Alcaraz's outbreak during the Miami Open?

You look at Alcaraz and (Jannik) Sinner, they are both world number one. They have a different way about them. The way they play, the way they are on court and their interaction with spectators. Alcaraz is a very, very nice version of Connors, in the way he interacts with the crowd, smiles and the variety in his game. He's got everything and draws a comparison with Roger Federer.

When you look at a guy like Sinner, I think, he put in even more work to be a world number one, like (Ivan) Lendl. I think from Alcaraz's perspective, if he gets a little up and down in his mind, it is good for him to take a break, more than it is for Sinner. Two different personalities, you got to give them that leeway.

FOR THE RECORD



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SWAMINOMICS

SWAMINATHAN S ANKLESARIA AIYAR

The next twist in the Gulf war are Iran's threats to the US. President Trump has threatened to land troops to take Kharg Island, Iran's main export hub, despite the enormous risks involved. He has also threatened to blast Iran's power stations and oil infrastructure if it does not cut oil to the US.

However, many Republicans, including Vice President J D Vance, want the US to declare victory and exit the Gulf in a hurry. The war has sent the price of petrol in the US up from an average of \$3.50 a gallon to \$4.50 a gallon. The war is unpopular — net voter support is minus 32%, according to the latest CNN/SSRS poll.

Globally, the war has hit prices of everything

from transport fuels and fertilisers to aluminium, plastics, petrochemicals, LNG, LPG, and helium. Global stocks are high enough to shrug off the impact of a short war, but a prolonged conflict will mean high inflation, leading to a Republican Party victory in the US Congressional elections in Nov, when Democrats hope to win both Houses. To avoid this outcome, Trump's latest speech suggests he will withdraw in a few weeks, leaving Gulf shipping at the mercy of Iran.

The days of free passage of ships through the Strait of Hormuz are over — a consensus that will not stop there. Once global shipping views tolls in Hormuz as "business as usual," other global choke points will ask, "Why not me too?" These choke points will ask, "Why not me too?" These choke points will ask, "Why not me too?" These choke points will ask, "Why not me too?"

Iran has been able to paralyse thousands of ships in the Gulf by merely threatening to hit them with drones, missiles, or missiles. It has hit no more than 25 ships so far. But hundreds of ship crews, shipping companies, and insurance companies have all declared that without a US guarantee — which Trump has vetoed — there can be no return to normal.

Some ships have paid as much as \$2 million to Iran for safe passage. This is not an entirely new practice — shipping companies have paid off Somali pirates in the past. Iran needs big money to rebuild facilities destroyed by Trump, and tolls will carry the political lesson that it will no longer follow free-passage norms set by Western powers.

Trump has told the Europeans and Asians to look out for themselves and police the Gulf if they so choose. But European leaders recoil in horror at the very idea. They have neither the military capacity, political guts, nor public backing for such adventures.

Our foreign policy experts have long resented the boorishness, arrogance, and bullying by the US as the non-Communist hegemon after World War II. But unlike the earlier European variety, American hegemony did not seek just national power and prestige. Despite the US not presiding over the creation of rules-based institutions for the good of the whole world, not just itself. This included the United Nations and its many arms, the World Bank, IMF, WTO, and specialised institutions for everything from civil aviation to patents. The US did not seek a larger slice of the global pie; it sought to grow the pie itself. That era of altruistic hegemony created unprecedented wealth across the globe.

Trump has now abandoned altruistic hegemony for narrow national gain. The US did not seek to take the US the lion's share of cost and responsibility for policing the post-World War II system, while others enjoyed a subsidised ride. He deplores

US altruism as misguided, and now demands pay-back from others. He wants to increase the US share of the pie and not worry about increasing the global pie. In this, he has touched a sensitive chord with voters. The US is unlikely to revert to altruistic hegemony, if he gets a little up and down in his mind, it is good for him to take a break, more than it is for Sinner. Two different personalities, you got to give them that leeway.

Indian foreign policy experts long wished for multipolarity in place of the two poles of the Cold War. Foreign policy experts long wished for multipolarity will give India more space for manoeuvre. True, but others will also get more space for actions that may seriously discomfit India. Having tasted blood, Iran is not going to go back to free naval passage. Other countries may well follow suit. And yet others will seek to profit by violating yet more norms. The global outlook stands permanently damaged.

Hormuz free passage is over, and so is the era of global cooperation

Over the past month, several internet users have received notifications from X or Instagram that some of their posts had been removed or even complete accounts, have been censored and blocked. Facebook pages with millions of followers have been banned. It's not just users. Supabase, a service developers use for building apps, found itself blocked in India, with no notice. It was the first of 2025, when operators complained, and Supabase tagged the IT minister on X. But why is this happening?

In March 2015, the Supreme Court delivered what remains the foundational verdict on online speech in this country in *Shreya Singhal v Union of India*, the court struck down the breathtakingly overbroad section 66A of the IT Act, which had been used to jail people for Facebook posts. But the case did something equally important that gets less attention. The court strengthened the safe harbour provision under section 79, which protects platforms from liability for what users say online. Until then, the provision's ambiguity was being exploited to pressure platforms into pulling down even perfectly legal speech by sending informal requests.

The SC also upheld the blocking powers under section 69A, reasoning that it came with structural safeguards: reasons recorded in writing, orders issued at least by a joint secretary-level officer, examined by a review committee. Crucially, the court said that the affected user, if identified, should be informed and given a hearing in the relevant appellate tribunal. These protections have been dismantled, and a digital censorship infrastructure has emerged.

First, amendments to the IT Rules in 2021 expanded the scope of section 79, bringing digital news outlets under the purview of the provision. Despite two high court orders staying these provisions, the govt circumvented them via notifications and administrative practices.

Two, the home ministry's Sahyog portal functions, without parliamentary sanction, as a hotline from govt to platforms for takedown orders under Section 79. Thirty-three states, seven central agencies, and 72 companies are onboarded. Users neither receive notice nor are orders provided on request. X Corp told the Karnataka high court it received 26 IT takedown requests in the first half of 2025, roughly 160 a day. At this volume, no platform can assess legality, and platforms end up censoring by default to preserve safe harbour, precisely what the SC had prevented in the *Shreya Singhal* case.

Three, the amendments to section 79 in Feb 2025 compressed the time for issuing takedown orders from 36 to three hours, the shortest in the world. News reports suggest a further reduction to one hour. This applies to all speech without excep-



NET EFFECT: With so many takedown orders, platforms end up censoring by default

tions for satire, journalism, or political criticism, and erasing the distinction between emergent and contestable orders. Meanwhile, blocking orders and review committee proceedings remain secret. At this scale and speed, platforms almost always act first, think never, censor always.

Four, the architecture has tilted laterally: more govt agencies now have the power to block speech under section 69A. The proposed amendments to rule 8(1) would extend oversight of the ministry of information and broadcasting from registered publishers to all users posting news content or commenting on them, including ordinary Indians sharing videos of potholed roads. This mirrors the draft Broadcasting Bill, 2024, which was withdrawn after public condemnation.

Five, sections 70B, 89 and 76 are being deployed by different govt authorities to demand extensive data from social media platforms, without adequate legal grounds and oversight. This will lend itself to self-censorship of legitimate speech.

Six, regulatory changes are accelerating. The Digital Personal Data Protection (DPD) Act delegating rule-making powers to the executive. IT Rules themselves have been amended at least annually since 2021. Govt's Fact Check Unit was struck down by the Bombay high court in 2024, barely a year after its notification. Courts can't keep pace by the time one provision is struck down, it is replaced by another. The current IT Rules consultations have a 15-day deadline. The implementation timeline for the last one was 10 days. When the IT secretary reportedly says that platforms should have started preparing to implement based on consultation drafts, it suggests that outcomes are predetermined.

The outcome: Censorship powers have been decentralised while delivery of takedown orders is centralised through a single portal. Scale has increased, and timeline crunched, limiting the scope of legal review. Keen to preserve market access in India, platforms comply. Citizens whose speech is restricted receive no notice, no hearing, no reasons, and neither govt nor platforms can be held to account by a legal system being outpaced by the agency's agility. It's time to sound the alarm if we don't change this infrastructure for censorship to become permanent.

Pahwa is founder, MediaNama and Gupta is founder director of the Internet Freedom Foundation

WORD DROP

LILY PADDING

What does the image of a frog leaping from one lily pad to another have to do with workplaces? Well, more and more youngsters are now adopting the amphibious style to navigate their career paths, often switching roles within the same industry or experimenting with side projects before attempting a complete pivot. The trend resonates particularly



with Gen Zs navigating uncertainty in a fast-changing world, where economic instability, burnout, and shifting definitions of success have made linear paths and loyalty less appealing. Data from human resources consulting firm Randstad shows that the average tenure of a Gen Z employee in the first five years of their career is just 1.1 years, compared with 1.8 years for millennials and almost three years for older generations.

INBOX

NO AMERICAN WAY
Apropos of "Iran shows..." (ATM, Mar 29), we can't go the American way. Here, we have employment, and development spending can't be compromised at the altar of a substantial increase in the defence budget. Becoming self-reliant, increased allocation in R&D and pushing private players to participate can help boost preparedness.

—Chanchal Nandy, Durgapur

Email your letters to the editor at sundaytimes@timesofindia.com with 'Sunday Mailbox' in the subject line. Please mention your name and city

Iran crisis: Lessons for India from a war nobody wanted

BY INVITATION

AUSAF SAYEED

One month into the US-Israeli assault on Iran, the conflict has produced outcomes few anticipated or desired. Indirect peace talks between Washington and Tehran — facilitated through Oman and Qatar — have shifted the narrative on February 28. Goalsposts shifted weekly: from degrading Iran's nuclear programme to neutralising proxy networks or enforcing regime change, before narrowing to a related priority — restoring navigation through the Strait of Hormuz, a watery Iran subsequently mined because of strikes. The result is self-inflicted irony: the war's only surviving objective — keeping Hormuz open — is precisely what the war has undone.

In his prime-time address, President Trump declared that the core strategic objectives of Operation Fury were nearing completion and conditioned any ceasefire on Iran reopening the Strait of Hormuz.

Tehran's response was unambiguous: Iran's foreign ministry said no negotiating terms were underway and that the country would defend itself for as long as strikes continued. The gap between Washington's proclaimed victory and Tehran's determination to fight captures the war's fundamental paradox. The likely outcome is a face-saving framework — supervised restrictions on enrichment, a partial reopening of Hormuz, a US declaration of success — leaving every underlying tension unresolved.

The conflict has exposed fractures in every alliance it was supposed to fortify. Most NATO allies declined direct involvement, prompting Trump to question the utility of the alliance.

The US states found themselves in the most invidious position: while Gulf leaders publicly called for diplomacy, Saudi Arabia and the UAE privately urged Washington to press the campaign until Iran's capabilities were decisively degraded. These same states bore the brunt of Iranian retaliatory strikes on their cities and oil infrastructure for hosting US bases they could neither vacate nor protect. The promised US security umbrella proved porous; Saudi Arabia's Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement with Pakistan reflects the hedging now underway, while China's Gulf engagement remains anchored in economics rather than military commitments.

Compounding Gulf unease is Prime Minister Netanyahu's declared ambition to make Israel the "region's superpower". He has repeatedly invoked the "Greater Israel" vision, consolidating control over southern Lebanon and expelling settlements under the cover of the war. For Gulf capitals, replacing one existential threat with another — a regionally dominant Israel armed with permanent American legitimacy — has sharpened the strategic calculus.

In a strong pushback, Turkish president Erdogan strongly opposed US-Israeli attempts to recruit PKK and PJAK-linked Kurdish fighters as ground proxies inside Iran, warning that ethnic destabilisation in Tehran would have cascading regional consequences.

The war has laid bare the calculations of every major power: Russia benefits from the conflict continuing every week; surging revenues and attention diverted from Ukraine.

China is the quiet beneficiary — buying discounted Iranian crude, settling in yuan rather than petrodollars, and watching rivals exhaust themselves in a war Beijing neither initiated nor needs to fight. The near-closure of the Strait of Hormuz triggered the most severe energy shock since 1973, accelerating a structural shift: Gulf bypass pipelines are being expanded, LNG imports are being fast-tracked, and alternative supply corridors are attracting fresh investment.

For India, the war has been a crisis, an opportunity, and a reflection of its foreign policy. India's strikes that triggered the conflict in the Strait of Hormuz, through which about 50% of India's crude imports are carried, triggered a severe energy crisis and prompted a major restructuring of its energy security options: diversifying sources, expanding strategic reserves, giving a fresh impetus to domestic exploration. Crude imports from Russia surged to a post-sanctions record of over two million barrels per day in March, while the US — now India's second-largest LNG supplier — continued delivering record volumes to Indian terminals.

India navigated the crisis with tactical dexterity, though the diplomatic strategy proved less straightforward. India co-sponsored UNSC Resolution 2171 — adopted on March 11 with 135 co-sponsors, a Security Council record — which condemned Iran's attacks on GCC states in the strongest terms but made no reference to the US-Israeli strikes that triggered the conflict.

As India remained silent on the violation of Iran's territorial integrity, capitals in the Global South observed how a nation claiming non-alignment's moral heritage exhibited a foreign policy driven more by constraints than by convictions.

The way forward does not require an impossible choice between Tehran and Riyadh, or between Washington and strategic autonomy. It requires consistency: applying the same standards of territorial integrity and international law regardless of the power concerned, and deploying those standards not to hedge alone, but to shape outcomes. India's value as a partner rests on its perceived independence. Preserving that perception, in word as well as deed, is not merely a moral aspiration, it is a national interest. The war nobody wanted has produced a opening that no one anticipated — for a credible principled architecture of a durable peace in an emerging world order. That role is India's to claim, or to forfeit.

Sayeed is former ambassador to Saudi Arabia and Yemen

MAINSTREAMING MAOISTS

THE MARCH 31 DEADLINE MAY SIGNAL A RETREAT OF RED TERROR AND A BATTLE WON, BUT WITHOUT DEEP, INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT — JOBS, EDUCATION, INFRASTRUCTURE AND REHABILITATION — THE WAR REMAINS FAR FROM OVER

BY PV RAMANA

The Union government declared on March 31 that the country had been rid of the Maoist challenge. However, remnants still remain. Home Minister Amit Shah said in the Lok Sabha, "Naxalism has now been almost completely eradicated from Bastar, and a campaign has begun to build schools and open ration shops in every village there". He also said, "Red Terror was not there because there was no development; rather, development could not happen there because of Red Terror." It is also true that Maoists destroyed, to some extent, whatever little had been achieved.

Quibbling is unnecessary at this stage. The challenge now is to extinguish the embers. Development efforts must, therefore, be given the highest priority. It is imperative that governments at the Centre and in the affected States take the lead.

Thrust, Legacy Districts

In 2008, the Centre stated that, of the total 610 districts, 196 were affected by the Maoist challenge at varying levels — high, moderate and low. It has now introduced a new classification. While reducing the number of affected districts over time, it has grouped 36 of them as 'thrust and legacy' districts where development projects will be implemented under Special Central Assistance. Thrust districts are those that may quickly slip into the Maoist fold, while legacy districts may take longer to do so.

However, the reasons for the emergence of naxalism have not vanished in the remaining 160 districts. It is necessary to extend welfare and development measures to all 196 districts to prevent them from 'slipping into the Maoist fold'. For this, a 'consortium approach' is suggested.

Consortium Approach

To ensure development becomes the peace dividend, all stakeholders must work together. Union and State governments, public and private industry, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), people living in forests, i.e. *moolvasis*, and rural areas, and surrendered Maoists should join hands. They should pool financial, material and human resources.

Rehabilitation

This must be accorded the highest priority. While expenditure on S&R is borne by the Union government, States need a uniform policy on rehabilitation.

Currently, each State has a different amount of reward money for those surrendering. For example, a Central Committee member receives Rs 25 lakh in Telangana but Rs 1 crore in Odisha. Likewise, for a State Committee member, it is Rs 20 lakh in Telangana, while Rs 50 lakh in Odisha. There is also no clarity on the retrospective applicability of revised rewards. Besides, revision hardly matters when there is almost none left to surrender.

Further, the government has no clear idea on the actual position such a person holds in the Maoist hierarchy; its understanding is dependent on individual claims. It is also unclear if benefits would be given in the State of their surrender or where the person was active in the underground. This leads to confusion. The choice of place to settle down should be left to those surrendering, and the reward disbursed accordingly. Moreover, there is also no clarity on whether the rewards are cumulative or limited to only the State where the surrender has taken place.

Delay in delivering the benefits remains a major concern. Many surrendered cadres are yet to receive housing, ration or Aadhaar cards. Such is the case even with very senior leaders and cadre.

What is the point then in extending an olive branch? It is, thus, necessary to conduct a monthly review at the district level to address administrative delays.

Development must be 'need-based'. Current efforts are largely limited to plain and semi-plain (rural) areas; their reach has to go beyond such areas. *Moolvasis* have different priorities than the urban population. Their standard of living should be improved through financial empowerment rather than consumer goods such as a TV, fridge.

Education, Skill Training

Enrollment in Eklaya and other schools must be encouraged, and dropouts discouraged. Surrendered Maoists should be included in literacy programmes. There are also several militants, sympathisers, displaced persons, and unemployed youth who are a veritable catchment group for future recruitment. They need to be made part of such programmes. A

wide range of vocation training — masonry, electrical and mechanical, plumbing, and automobile repair — should be offered. Instructors from local polytechnic colleges can support training.

The inherent bias that *moolvasis* have lower cognitive abilities must be eliminated. Providing opportunities to learn skills of their choice, such as carpentry, making bamboo products for household use, metalwork, and packaging local produce, will help.

Health and Water

Cerebral malaria remains a major health threat, requiring treatment within 24 hours. Finding transport in such cases becomes a difficult task. The government should deploy 'bike-ambulances' in forest areas.

The Telangana government has announced free health cards to surrendered Maoists and medical facilities in government super specialty hospitals. This should be replicated across the country. The reach of Public Health Centres (PHCs) is limited in tribal hamlets. Surrendered Maoists could form their own medical teams to supplement the government's efforts. They can supply routine medicines for normal ailments sourced from PHCs. Urgent steps need to be undertaken to provide safe drinking water, especially in tribal hamlets and expand its reach.

More importantly, when surrendered Maoists and the *moolvasis* undertake development work by being physically involved, there is ownership. This would ensure quality and safety.

Roads, Other Infra

Large tracts of land do not have road connectivity. The government already has an ongoing programme, Rural Roads in Left Wing Extremism (LWE) Affected Areas. Maoists could supplement this effort by encouraging the local populace. If people in two adjoining villages or hamlets join hands, they could provide connectivity between them and extend it to the next and last.

The *moolvasis* could lay internal roads within the village by themselves. Small bridges and culverts can also be constructed. These works should be outside the Viksit Bharat — Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission Gramin (VB — G Ram G) scheme.

Qualified civil engineering graduates and diploma holders should be employed in these projects, thereby generating employment. The more, the better. Many such candidates are already available from local polytechnics situated in the Integrated Tribal Development Agency (ITDA) project areas.

Livelihoods

The government should award contracts for fellings and selling timber to local communities as a collective — *moolvasis* — rather than to large contractors. The income generated by these collectives could serve, in both the short and long term, as seed money for development activities in their areas.

In mining projects, the local population should be given priority for employment, initially in roles such as labour, security personnel, support staff, and drivers. With appropriate skill development, they can gradually be employed in technical positions as well.

Public, Private Industry

Both public sector undertakings (PSUs) and private industry have enormous funds at their disposal in the form of Corporate Social Responsibility and District Mineral Fund (DMF). These amounts should be utilised for improving health, education and livelihoods.

Employment should be generated in the affected areas by employing *moolvasis* and other locals, not outsiders. Lloyd Steel in Maharashtra recently employed some surrendered Maoists and gave them shares in the company, a good example that can be replicated in other industries.

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) should supplement government's efforts by providing skill development and pooling in other resources. Vernacular media must highlight the surrender and rehabilitation programmes of the government, and engage in constructive criticism.

Finding Finances

PSUs have the District Mineral Fund (DMF), which mandates spending 'at least 70 per cent of funds in directly affected mining areas on high-priority sectors like health, education, water, and environment, with a focus on livelihood, skill development, and housing'.

There are also large private industries, which have funds earmarked for CSR. These should be used for the development and welfare of these areas.

A great deal of blood has been shed over the past few decades. People, police and revolutionaries have made numerous sacrifices. With peace emerging, this should quickly translate into development and prosperity.

As Sun Tzu wrote in *The Art of War*: There is no instance of a country having benefited from prolonged war

(The author keenly follows the Maoist movement in India)



ILLUSTRATION : GURUG

Displacement

It is essential to ensure the holistic rehabilitation of people, invariably *moolvasis*, displaced by mining projects. This includes providing housing and civic amenities, alternative land (or monetary compensation in lieu of it), and ensuring that they fully receive and benefit from due compensation. The descendants of those displaced by the Damodar Valley Corporation multipurpose project, a flagship initiative of the 1950s, claim that their grandparents were not able to make informed choices. The compensation did not reach them, and only a few secured employment, that too after protracted legal battles that eventually reached the Supreme Court. Around the same period, and later in the 1970s, *moolvasis* were further displaced under Project Dandakaranya and pushed deeper into interior regions. Lack of land titles worsened their conditions. The Maoists found a ready sympathiser base among them. These factors must be carefully considered when planning future mining projects.

How did the 'Amaravati Bill' come into place?

Why has Amaravati been declared the sole capital of A.P.? Why did the A.P. Reorganisation Act need to be amended?

V. Raghavendra

The story so far:

In April 2, Parliament passed the Andhra Pradesh Reorganisation (Amendment) Bill, 2026, to recognise Amaravati as the sole and permanent capital of Andhra Pradesh. There was broad political consensus regarding the passing of the Bill, with even the principal Opposition party, the Congress, extending support to it. Only the YSR Congress Party (YSRCP), which had earlier proposed a three-capital plan for the State, opposed it.

What is the background of this Bill?

The undivided State of Andhra Pradesh was bifurcated in 2014 with the passing of the Andhra Pradesh Reorganisation Act, 2014. This facilitated the creation of the State of Telangana and residual Andhra Pradesh. The Act specified that Hyderabad could be used as the capital by both the States for a period not exceeding 10 years, after which Andhra Pradesh had to establish its own capital.

After the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) came to power in Andhra Pradesh in 2014, Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu declared that Amaravati would be the new capital of the State and moved his administration out of Hyderabad. However, the project fell into a limbo after the YSRCP came to power in 2019 and proposed three capitals instead: Visakhapatnam as the executive capital, Amaravati as the legislative capital, and

Kurnool as the judicial capital. In March 2022, a three-judge Bench of the Andhra Pradesh High Court ruled that the capital could not be shifted out of Amaravati, primarily on the ground that the State lacked the legislative competence required to reverse a policy decision taken in 2014-15. The YSRCP government challenged the High Court judgment in the Supreme Court by filing a Special Leave Petition (SLP).

The SLP was pending when the NDA returned to power in the State. The Naidu government filed an affidavit in late 2024 in the apex court, affirming its commitment to develop Amaravati as the capital. The SLP, filed by the YSRCP government, is in the process of being withdrawn, in alignment with the present government's vision of building a greenfield capital.

What does the Bill say?

On March 28, 2026, the Andhra Pradesh Legislative Assembly adopted a resolution requesting the Union government to grant statutory recognition to Amaravati as the State's sole capital. The resolution sought an amendment to Section 5 of the Andhra Pradesh Reorganisation Act, 2014, to explicitly name Amaravati as the capital and end the ambiguity caused by previous three-capital proposals. Following the request, the Union government introduced the Andhra Pradesh Reorganisation (Amendment) Bill, 2026.

As mandated by Section 5 of the Andhra Pradesh Reorganisation Act, 2014, Hyderabad served as the joint capital for Telangana and Andhra Pradesh for a decade starting June 2, 2014. This arrangement concluded on June 2, 2024, after which Hyderabad became the exclusive capital of Telangana, leaving Andhra Pradesh to establish a new capital.

The new Bill seeks to declare and notify Amaravati as the sole capital city of Andhra Pradesh with effect from June 2, 2024, by inserting the words "at Amaravati" to Section 5(2) of the 2014 Act and adding the phrase "and Amaravati includes the capital city areas notified under the Andhra Pradesh Capital Region Development Authority Act, 2014" to the explanation to Section 5.

Why amend the Andhra Pradesh Reorganisation Act, 2014?

Amending the Act is essential because the genesis of the capital of the successor State of Andhra Pradesh lies in this Central legislation. Amaravati needed to be explicitly recognised as the capital with statutory backing. The State government believed that the only way to prevent a future dispensation from shifting or splitting the capital was to amend the Act.

Why has the YSRCP opposed the Bill?

YSRCP MPs said they were not opposed to the Bill declaring Amaravati as the capital, but were unhappy with its "present form," as it allegedly ignores unfulfilled promises, especially with regard to the Land Pooling Scheme. This involves the voluntary contribution of land by farmers in exchange for smaller, developed, and high-value plots, making them partners in the development process. The YSRCP has argued that the interests of farmers who had parted with land for the capital project remain unaddressed. Party member P.V. Midhun Reddy said a clear timeline must be provided for compensating farmers and incorporated into the Bill.

Why does Trump want to pull out of NATO?

Why does the U.S. administration believe that NATO's founding principles and membership need to be 're-examined'? Why was NATO formed, and what are the recent developments that have led to fissures? Can the U.S. easily exit NATO? How much does it contribute to the alliance?

Subhasini Haidar

The story so far:

Last week, in an interview to the British newspaper, U.S. President Donald Trump said withdrawing U.S. membership from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is now "beyond reconsideration". Through this, he indicated that one of America's oldest alliances since World War 2 could be on the brink of a break-up.

The tough words, and the U.S. President's description of NATO as a "paper tiger", reflect an antagonism that goes back more than a decade that has been heightened during the ongoing war with Iran. Even so, the U.S. may not find it easy to exit the 32-nation, 76-year old alliance.

Why is Mr. Trump angry with NATO?

The immediate trigger for Mr. Trump's comments to *The Telegraph* was that most NATO allies refused U.S. requests for military and airspace support in connection with the war against Iran, where the U.S. has faced significant setbacks in recent weeks.

While Spain and Italy have directly criticised the U.S.-Israeli strikes on Iran, France has denied U.S. military jets overflight permission to fly to Israel. Even the U.S.'s closest allies – the U.K., Germany, and Canada – have refused to take part in operations.

U.S. officials feel that this stand violates Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, which states that "an armed attack against one NATO member shall be considered an attack against them all".

Two days before Mr. Trump's interview appeared, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio had also told an American television channel that NATO's founding principles and membership would have to be "re-examined". "If NATO is just about us (the U.S.) defending Europe if they're attacked, but them denying us basic rights when we need them, then that's

As per the North Atlantic Treaty, the U.S. government would have to hand itself the exit notice, and then inform other countries, which would make for an awkward process

not a very good arrangement," Mr. Rubio said.

The seeds of U.S. discontent with NATO had been planted by Mr. Trump ever since his first term as President, when he announced that NATO was "obsolete". He criticised European allies for not pulling their weight in military expenditure while depending on the U.S. for their defence. In Mr. Trump's second term, the rift grew over his rough treatment of Ukraine. More recently, he was angered that NATO members criticised the U.S.'s regime change operations in Venezuela and that they fiercely opposed his plans to annex Greenland. With the U.S.-Israel war with Iran entering its sixth week, and no exit strategy in sight, European allies have become more determined in not joining the operations.

What is the purpose of NATO?

NATO (or OTAN, according to the French abbreviation) was formed in 1949, with the U.S., Canada and 10 West European countries which felt threatened by the Soviet Union, particularly after the installation of pro-Soviet Communist regimes in Eastern Europe and China. The North Atlantic Treaty, signed in Washington DC on April 4, 1949, created the inter-governmental military grouping mandated with "collective security". Over time, NATO gathered more members, including Greece and Turkey in the 1950s and Spain in 1982.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, more than a dozen East European countries joined, triggering a backlash from Russia. After Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, which was not a member, Finland and Sweden joined NATO, taking the total membership up to 32.

Ironically, although NATO was set up to counter the Soviet threat, NATO forces did not carry out a single military operation during the Cold War; it was only after conflicts in the Baltic states in the 1990s that NATO forces began joint operational missions, such as in Iraq (1990 and 2003), Bosnia (1992), Kosovo (1999), and Afghanistan (2001).

NATO does not have a separate independent force, but when required, combines resources and personnel of the 32 members that operate under a unified command structure called the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE), based in Belgium. It is led by the Supreme Allied Commander Europe, a U.S. 4-star General or Admiral who heads the U.S. European Command.

Although Ukraine has now backed away from plans to join NATO, Ukrainian forces have worked closely with NATO after Russia launched its 'Special Military Operations' in February 2022. They have received major aid packages, including a \$40 billion pledge at the NATO Summit in 2024, training, and security assistance.

As a result, Mr. Trump has complained that when it came to his demands that NATO members support U.S. operations in Iran, send

their navies to help open up the Strait of Hormuz, or facilitate refuelling and overflight missions, their response should have been "automatic".

"We've been there automatically, including Ukraine," he said. "Ukraine wasn't our problem. It was a test, and we were there for them, and we would always have been there for them. They weren't there for us," he told *The Telegraph*.

How much does the U.S. fund NATO operations?

Throughout all these operations, the U.S. has provided much of NATO's funding, including 62% of the defence spending and about 15% of the civil budget of the alliance. It also provides NATO countries with a "nuclear umbrella" and maintains U.S. military bases that enhance deterrence in the region. Under increasing security concerns and U.S. pressure, all NATO members agreed at the 2025 Hague Summit to raise defence spending to 5% of their GDP by 2035, but Mr. Trump has continued to chide allies to share more of the burden.

How hard would it be for the U.S. to pull out of NATO?

A U.S. exit from NATO or the Alliance Treaty seems unimaginable and is many times more difficult than its exit from more than 60 different multilateral organisations and treaties, including the World Health Organization and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in January 2026, and much more legally complex than the U.K.'s exit from the European Union (Brexit) in January 2020.

Article 13 of the North Atlantic Treaty provides for the withdrawal of any member, but says the member must submit a one-year "notice of denunciation... to the Government of the United States of America, which will inform the Governments of the other Parties." As the depository authority, the U.S. government would therefore have to hand itself the notice, and then inform other countries, which would make for an awkward process.

In addition, and as a measure against Mr. Trump's own statements in his first tenure, the Biden administration pushed a law through the U.S. Congress in 2020 that prohibits the U.S. President from trying to "suspend, terminate, denounce, or withdraw the United States from the North Atlantic Treaty – without the advice and consent of the Senate or an act of Congress". Alternative paths could see the U.S. withdraw personnel from SHAPE or skip NATO meetings – in the manner India has withdrawn from attending SAARC summits – which would make the organisation virtually defunct.

In terms of its impact on the world order, especially in the midst of a war, the U.S.' withdrawal from NATO would lead to the remaking of all global security structures, severely weaken the hold of the Western coalition, and strengthen other global powers such as Russia and China. It is therefore more likely that both the U.S. and its NATO allies will work to avoid such a drastic step, beginning with the visit of NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte to Washington on April 8.



NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte during a press conference at the NATO headquarters in Brussels, Belgium, on March 26, 2026. REUTERS

What are the concerns over the FCRA Bill?

How does the Home Ministry regulate foreign donations to NGOs in India? What are the key changes proposed to the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Amendment Bill, 2026? Why has the Opposition objected to the Bill and why was the Bill deferred? What is its current status?

Vijaita Singh

The story so far:

The Central government proposed to introduce the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Amendment Bill, 2026 during the Budget Session of Parliament, which concluded on April 2. The Bill seeks to amend the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act, 2010, under which registration is mandatory for non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and associations to receive foreign funds or donations. It was introduced in the Lok Sabha on March 25; however, following an uproar by Opposition parties, its discussion and passage were deferred.

According to the statement of objects and reasons, around 16,000 associations are registered under the FCRA and receive approximately ₹22,000 crore annually. The Act regulates the acceptance and utilisation of

The Catholic Bishops' Conference of India said the Bill amounts to executive overreach and that it could unduly interfere with minority institutions and civil society

foreign contributions to ensure that such inflows do not adversely affect national interest, public order, or national security.

What are the key changes proposed?

One of the key changes proposed in the Bill is the appointment of a "designated authority" to take over, manage, or dispose of assets created from foreign funds when an NGO's FCRA registration is suspended, cancelled, or not renewed. This authority will have the powers of a civil court and can order the transfer or sale of assets owned by NGOs to either the government or any other body. The 2010 Act provided for regulation of foreign fund flows, but lacked a statutory framework for managing assets created from such funds. The government said that Section 15 of the Act provides for vesting of assets, but the absence of a comprehensive framework for the supervision, management, and disposal of such assets has led to administrative uncertainty and scope for misuse.

Another proposed amendment broadens the definition of an NGO's "key functionary" beyond office bearers and directors to include trustees, partners, the Karta of a Hindu undivided family, governing body members, or anyone controlling or managing the organisation, and makes them liable for FCRA offences unless they can prove lack of knowledge or due diligence.

What are the other changes proposed?

The Bill seeks to amend Section 43 of the parent Act to require any law enforcement agency or State government to obtain prior approval from the Central government before initiating investigations into FCRA-related complaints.

It also proposes timelines for the receipt and utilisation of foreign contributions under the "prior permission" category (one-time receipt of funds), and provides for automatic cessation of certificates upon expiry or non-renewal.

The Bill proposes to reduce the maximum imprisonment for FCRA offences from five years to one year. It also proposes fixed timelines for the utilisation of foreign funds received under the "prior permission" category unlike the open-ended provision under the 2010 Act.

How does the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) regulate foreign donations in India?

The MHA regulates foreign donations in the country through the FCRA to ensure that such funds do not adversely affect the country's internal security. The legislation was first enacted in 1976. In 2010, it was repealed and replaced with a new legislation. The 2010 Act came into force on May 1, 2011 and has been amended in 2016, 2018, and 2020.

The FCRA registration is valid for five years, after which the NGO has to apply for a renewal. Since 2015, the FCRA registrations of more than 18,000 NGOs have been cancelled. As on April 3, there are 14,965 FCRA-registered NGOs active in the country. NGOs can receive foreign contributions for social, educational, religious, economic, and cultural programmes.

Why is the Bill being opposed?

The Catholic Bishops' Conference of India said the Bill amounts to "executive overreach" and raises concerns about "undue interference" in the functioning of minority institutions and civil society groups. The body objected to "clauses that grant sweeping powers to the Central government, allowing it to deny renewal or cancel licenses of organisations" and the powers "to assume control over institutions, including their funds, properties, and other assets." The Chief Ministers of poll-bound Tamil Nadu and Kerala have opposed the Bill as well.

What is the status of the Bill?

The Bill was deferred following an uproar by the Opposition. In Kerala and Tamil Nadu, there were fears it could be misused to seize assets of minority institutions, such as churches. Meanwhile, the Bharatiya Janata Party has been reaching out to the Christian community in Kerala to build a support base. The legislation remains active.



Opposition MPs demanding the withdrawal of the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Amendment Bill, 2026, during the Budget Session of Parliament, in New Delhi. ANI

PROFILES

Exploring the new middle

Ro Khanna

The Democratic congressman, who combines points from America First nationalism with the welfareism of the Democratic left, proposes state support for the development of manufacturing and the working class, and calls for moderation in maximalist tech capitalism

Varghese K. George

The boundaries of the left and the right, conservatives and liberals, are all frayed in U.S. politics, as old ideas and loyalties collapse. The Democratic Party has not figured out a viable response to the chaos unleashed by Donald J. Trump a decade ago, in terms of leadership and ideas. Ambitious politicians are exploring the turmoil in the hope of chancing upon a career catapult. One who is increasingly in the spotlight is Rohit — Ro Khanna — who represents Silicon Valley in the U.S. House of Representatives.

Mr. Khanna was first elected to the House on the same day Mr. Trump was elected President in 2016. He has placed himself in the eye of the storm, hoping to come out on top on the other side. Mr. Khanna believes that the Democratic Party has become “stale”, with “the same personalities. The same talking points. The same consultants. And I’m excited that you’ve got a lot of new voices that are emerging,” as he said in an interview.

Mr. Khanna has broken from the orthodoxy of his home Democratic turf and sought partnerships with a spectrum of political players, getting tongues wagging about his plans for the 2028 presidential election. Would he run for the Democratic nomination? He has not said no, and that probably is a yes at the moment.

He is raising funds when he is not raising the political temperature in the country. Mr. Khanna is evidently testing the waters and figuring out whether he has a winning script. Among questions that remain unclear is whether his brown skin could turn out to be an advantage or disadvantage, which would depend on how the racial bipolarity of American politics turns out in the next season. The midterm elections of November will be a defining moment for Mr. Khanna’s future — as it would be for the country’s politics in general.

Mr. Khanna is pushing the boundaries of American political conversations in a measured manner — causing enough uproar to be noticed

as a disruptor, and keeping it below the threshold of slipping out of lane. He has been at the forefront of a campaign for the release of the complete files related to Jeffrey Epstein, the dead convict in a sex-trafficking scandal that entangles a long list of America’s powerful. He is questioning the President’s powers for taking the country to war in the middle of yet another war the current incumbent, Mr. Trump, has taken the U.S. into.

Economic agenda

He has a comprehensive economic agenda that combines points from America First nationalism and the welfareism of the Democratic left. He proposes state support for the development of manufacturing and the working class, and calls for moderation in maximalist tech capitalism. “We need a Marshall Plan for America — a federal government working with the private sector, working with labour, working with universities to re-industrialise these communities,” he said in an interview to the Foreign Policy magazine. He also stands for welfare expansion in health and education.

However, what marks out Mr. Khanna as an unmatched adventurer is his relentless questioning of Israel, and its influence in U.S. politics. That is a high-stakes gamble to be the voice of an evident but untested emerging strand of American politics — a bipartisan condemnation of Israel’s expansionism and militarism. From an unquestioned bipartisan support for Israel, there is now an unmistakable bipartisan critique of Israel across a spectrum of intensity. In September 2025, he posted on X agreeing with “the UN commission’s heartbreaking finding that there is a genocide in Gaza”. “What matters is what we do about it — stop military sales that are being used to kill civilians and recognise a Palestinian state.”

In 2025, Mr. Khanna started a novel experiment of organising town hall meetings in Congressional districts held by Republicans in California. He explained it as a move to demonstrate accountability to the people. He was



ILLUSTRATION: R. RAJESH

asked about his presidential ambitions by the *New York Times* then, and Mr. Khanna said it was immaterial. “Ambition is a good thing if it’s used towards good ends...I’m of Hindu faith. And one of the great teachings of the Gita is if you do your duty without worrying about the reward, you’re more likely to get rewards.”

He has continued with similar statements that kept the ambiguity until now. Mr. Khanna has strong connections with India and Hinduism, but he is a strident critic of Hindutva. His maternal grandfather was a

freedom fighter for India, and spent five years in a British jail — a fact that Mr. Khanna rarely misses an opportunity to mention.

Pro-Israeli groups in the country have perhaps noticed him the most, and soon after he called Gaza a genocide, AIPAC unleashed a campaign blitzkrieg in his district. He is also facing a primary challenge — his opponent is another Indian American who accused Mr. Khanna of being too involved in big politics at the cost of constituents. He has doubled down on his criticism of Israel. In early 2026, he

In September 2025, Ro Khanna posted on X agreeing with ‘the UN commission’s heartbreaking finding that there is a genocide in Gaza’. ‘What matters is what we do about it — stop military sales that are being used to kill civilians and recognise a Palestinian state’, he said

said the United States should view Israel first and foremost as “an occupying nation violating human rights”.

Expansion of politics

Mr. Khanna has appeared on several talk shows and podcasts hosted by hosts who hold controversial views, and believes that the expansion of politics will be in reaching out across the aisle rather than preaching to the choir. This approach to crafting a new middle is most pronounced in his enduring partnership with Thomas Massie, a Republican Congressman from Kentucky whom Mr. Trump is trying to unseat in November. Mr. Khanna and Mr. Massie have made an alliance on the Epstein files, opposing presidential fiat in war and other issues, and resisting the influence of Israel. Mr. Khanna explained that his politics and alliances are about questioning “elite impunity”. “There’s a sense in this country that rich and powerful people with connections don’t play by the same rules,” he told ABC7 San Francisco in an interview. Mr. Khanna does not take campaign money from Political Action Committees — an American mechanism to funnel big money into elections.

Mr. Khanna argues that institutional power — neocore foreign policy establishments, AIPAC, free-trade orthodoxy, and the Democratic old guard — has failed ordinary Americans, and that the corrective requires unlikely coalitions and willingness to say what others will not. Whether that is a governing philosophy or an extended audition is the question his 2026 primary will begin to answer.

THE GIST

Ro Khanna has broken from the orthodoxy of his home Democratic turf and sought partnerships with a spectrum of political players, getting tongues wagging about his plans for the 2028 presidential election

He has been at the forefront of a campaign for the release of the complete files related to Jeffrey Epstein

He is questioning the President’s powers for taking the country to war in the middle of yet another war the current incumbent, Mr. Trump, has taken the U.S. into

Mission moon

Artemis II

The U.S. has cast the programme to return American astronauts to the moon as part of a race against China, but Beijing views its mission differently

Vasudevan Mukunth

An irony hides in the context of the NASA Artemis II launch on April 2. The U.S. has both openly and in internal reports cast the Artemis programme to return American astronauts to the moon as part of a race against China. But as China in Space editor Jack Congram has pointed out, China does not believe it is racing the U.S. to the moon.

Instead, it has developed its programme to send Chinese astronauts (taikonauts) to the moon as part of a national programme, with ties to local industries and developmental goals. The Chinese government is thus committed to funding the programme and providing political support for it, allowing it to advance at a steady pace — one that has evidently unnerved the U.S.

Under pressure, NASA, in its public messaging at least, has responded by describing its priorities and urgency in terms of being in a race with the China National Space Administration (CNSA), with the U.S. state providing vacillating support for those priorities: swinging one way because of the costs, then the other because ‘beating’ China offers the prospect of projecting American supremacy in at least one



AFP

high-technology domain, after having that undermined in semiconductor and clean energy.

The irony? As Mr. Congram put it, the liberal democracy “sees the moon as a proving ground in a geopolitical contest”, with commercial connotations tacked on, while the party state “views it as an extension of long-term science-driven development”. Perhaps this is not an irony at all given the success of China’s state-directed technological development in the last half century, or perhaps CNSA’s apparent indifference to NASA’s efforts is rooted in secure knowledge that it is, in fact, ahead. Either way, China is giving the U.S. more than a run for its money.

Chinese pressure
And if the Chinese pressure is taken away, the U.S. may lose the sole reason it is in such a rush to return American astronauts to the moon. Politicians, policy-makers, and pundits have mentioned research and

exploration but they don’t seem to be driving forces. In fact, as astrophysicist Erika Nesvold has observed, neither the U.S. government nor NASA has formally articulated what is so objectionable about allowing Chinese astronauts on the moon first (a stand reminiscent of U.S. President Donald Trump’s speech on the same day, April 2, about why he went to war against Iran.)

This extended preamble may be necessary to understand the NASA Artemis programme because, in general, the sights and sounds of any sufficiently ‘large’ space mission can spark enough awe and wonder to blow away sceptical thoughts. The spectacle alone can seem sufficient reason to do it.

When the 98-m-tall Space Launch System (SLS) rocket lifted off with the Orion capsule and its crew of four astronauts early on April 2, there were cheers on the ground and around the world. These machines were products of a sophis-

ticated engineering effort. The rocket’s core stage was powered by four RS-25 engines and two five-part boosters that together exerted more liftoff thrust than the workhorse of the Apollo missions.

This configuration was required to support the Orion crew capsule, which has been integrated with the European Service Module to provide propulsion and life-support systems. Orion is a little larger than a Maruti Suzuki Swift, weighs 11 tonnes (26 tonnes including the service module), can sustain a crew of four for 21 days, includes an advanced launch abort system for crew safety, and uses modern avionics and touchscreen interfaces instead of the largely analogue controls of earlier spacecraft. The capsule’s 5-metre-wide heat shield is also the largest of its kind.

There is in all of us a tendency to equate one country’s achievement in space flight as being indicative of what humans as a species are capable of. Space is hard and the astronauts who ‘survive’ it are (technically) proof that we can all survive it. But as much as this tendency is justified, and lends itself to gratifying romanticisms, it bears remembering that at least for now the Artemis programme is a flawed representative of the human aspirations for space.

At the global high table

Mohammad Ishaq Dar

A confidant of the Sharifs, the Foreign Minister is leading Pakistan’s diplomatic reboot, from restarting ties with Bangladesh to mediation in the Gulf

Kallol Bhattacharjee

Early 1970s were the darkest years in the history of Pakistan. The country was defeated and divided by India in the war of 1971. The young generation, the first post-Partition generation, had a gloomy future ahead. In such a situation came the grand Islamic summit of 1974 that was organised by Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto.

Presidents and Prime Ministers from all over the Islamic world came to Lahore. One of them, Libya’s Muammar Gaddafi, became the darling of the crowd as he was already popular because of his anti-imperialist policy. Bhutto honoured Gaddafi by naming the biggest stadium in Lahore after him. Gaddafi returned the favour by opening the Libyan economy for Pakistani professionals and by investing in Pakistan.

One of the professionals of that time, a young Pakistani chartered accountant, Mohammad Ishaq Dar, was hired by Gaddafi’s government to be a senior auditor in the Department of Audit-General in Tripoli, Libya. That was how current Foreign Minister of Pakistan, who is in global spotlight because of organising peace meetings with Foreign Ministers of Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey to end U.S.-Israel’s war on

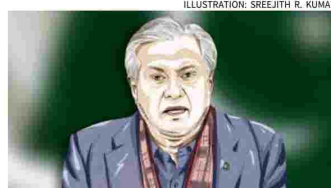


ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

Iran, was introduced to the topsy-turvy world of international politics and diplomacy. Mr. Dar, hailing from a middle class Kashmiri family in Lahore, belonged to the first generation of Pakistanis who had no memory of united India. Having started as a director of finance of textiles outfit in London in 1974-76, Mr. Dar quickly branched out to the new petro-dollar rich world of the Arab monarchs and presidents.

Mr. Dar was still working in the financial sector when Pakistan was engaged by the U.S. in waging the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan that ultimately evicted the Soviet Union from Afghanistan. The end of Soviet presence in Afghanistan coincided with the return of democracy in Pakistan as General Zia-ul-Haq was killed in a mysterious air crash on August 17, 1988. The first post-Zia government was formed by the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) under Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto. Benazir’s government was

followed by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. Under the first Nawaz Sharif government, Mr. Dar headed the Pakistan Investment Board during 1992-93. He made his debut in the National Assembly next year which saw the return of Benazir Bhutto for her second and final term as Prime Minister.

The Sharif loyalist
Ishaq Dar has been part of the Nawaz Sharif-Shehbaz Sharif era of Pakistan Muslim League(N) for more than three decades and is one of the senior most leaders in the party after the Sharif brothers. He has served as Finance Minister on at least four occasions, starting with November 1998. His last stint as the Finance Minister was in September 2022 that ended in August 2023. He was sworn as the 39th Foreign Minister of Pakistan on March 11, 2024. He was appointed as the Deputy PM on April 28 by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif.

Apart from holding glo-

bal dialogue with stakeholders for the war in the Gulf, Mr. Dar is also the face of Pakistan’s tough policy on the Taliban regime in Kabul. He has also carried out important initiatives by restarting Pakistan’s ties with Bangladesh, after a gap of nearly one and half decades. However, these initiatives were made possible as Mr. Dar has the full political weight of the Sharif establishment as his son Ali Dar is married to Asma Nawaz Sharif, the less prominent daughter of Nawaz Sharif.

Ali Dar is an adviser to the Government of Punjab and is also known to be in charge of his father’s social media activities and image management. Mr. Dar’s presence in Pakistan government comes at a time when the children of the Sharif clan are taking up various assignments and are being groomed for national level responsibilities.

Already, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif’s son Hamza has served a brief tenure (April-July 2022) as the Chief Minister of Punjab, and Nawaz Sharif’s daughter, Maryam Nawaz, is serving as the Chief Minister of Punjab. As the younger generation of the Sharif clan gets ready for key national roles, Mr. Dar is carrying out the responsibilities of the powerful family as he is evidently trusted by patriarch Nawaz Sharif.

REFLECTIONS

THE BIG PICTURE

The founding vision of India's democracy and Bengal SIR

To have millions of people not know whether they'll be allowed to elect their representative would have been unimaginable to the founders of the Republic. It threatens to mark these Bengal elections with a permanent asterisk

When India stepped into freedom in the autumn of 1947, democracy was deemed by many to be a doomed project — nowhere had such an impoverished country managed to even feed its own people and staved off external aggressors. Yet, that anxiety didn't stop India's founding fathers and mothers from bestowing unto the country an extraordinary promise of universal adult franchise. The residents of the young nation became voters before they became citizens. Beginning November 1947, bureaucrats in the Constituent Assembly Secretariat (CAS) worked under the guidance of BN Rau to realise the dream of universal suffrage.

It was an audacious experiment. Britain took nearly three centuries to extend the vote to all its adults. The US still didn't value every citizen as equal. In anticipation of a Constitution that was two years away, a small group of officers pushed the frontiers of democratic imagination in a country wounded by Partition, bruised by colonialism, bleeding poverty, and harbouring 82% illiteracy. In the face of the killing of nearly two million people, the displacement of another 18 million,

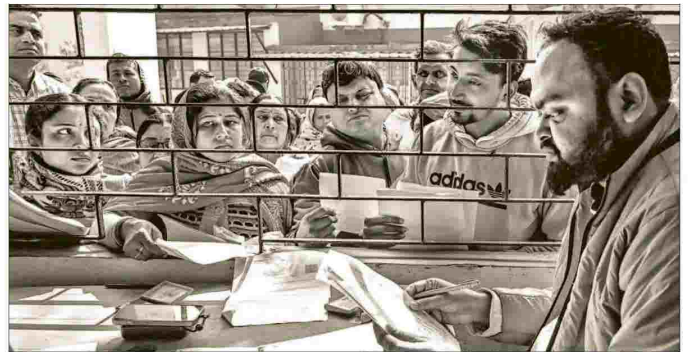
and the ongoing integration of 552 princely States, India's still-nascent government machinery succeeded in breathing life into philosophy by building the country's first voter roll.

As noted by historian Omrit Shani in *How India Became Democratic*, it was a fraught exercise, but officials and governments showed imagination and flexibility, moving away from colonial prerogative to aives of keeping the voting pool practical and manageable. Especially on the question of registering refugees and women, officials built an expansive idea of a voter, focusing on inclusion over inadvertent errors.

Governments asked officials going to register voters to inform people in the village or ward about their planned visit days beforehand, and to come at a time people were likely to be home. They discarded previously institutionalised contempt in registering women and poor people, lowering qualification requirements to broaden the base. Especially on the question of refugees who sat on the knife's edge of putative citizenship, the CAS devised ingenious modes of inclusion — it engaged with citizens' associations writing against state governments reticent to register migrants, it allowed registration on a mere declaration of intention to stay back in their constituency, and took into account fears that a strict cut-off date, originally March 1948, will disenfranchise millions — eventually relaxing a 180-day residency requirement. "There should, therefore, be no objection to 'refugees' being registered in the rolls, for their province, on a mere declaration by them of their intention to reside permanently in the town or village concerned," Rau wrote in a memo. When the West Bengal government mandated an affidavit priced at ₹2, or the

Assam government slowed the registration, fixed a court stamp fee, and strict informal checks and a deadline, the CAS responded to hundreds of letters and sent instructions to state authorities. When the government of Central Provinces and Berar refused to accept self-declarations or the government of Madras refused to register refugees from Hyderabad, the CAS interceded and oversaw corrective action. Across the country, the CAS responded to complaints of abuse and overreach by summoning senior officials, Shani wrote. Eventually when the elections began in 1951, the rolls had stood the test of time, been republished and refined, and went on to serve as a model for inclusion for other young democracies in Asia and Africa.

For a country that navigated such treacherous terrain seven decades ago, it is indeed strange to witness a major state headed to elections with a shadow looming over the voting rights of millions of people. Yet, that is what the special intension revision (SIR) of electoral rolls has unfortunately achieved in West Bengal. Of the six million people put under a nebulous "logical discrepancy category", the fates of five million people have been decided. There are no consolidated numbers of how many are in and how many out amid complaints of technical glitches and error-strewn rolls, there is no road map for when the rest of the adjudications will be out, no clear logic or reasoning has been given to individual voters in deciding their application even as reports have blamed faulty software and translation gaps from Bengal to England. The tribunals set up to hear the applications of people who've been rejected have less than a week before the rolls are frozen for the two-phase polls, offering hundreds of thousands of people a dis-



The reversal of the burden of proof, putting the onus of proving citizenship on the most vulnerable, is part of a worldwide phenomenon where any move to widen the franchise is seen with suspicion.

quieting choice of either travelling to Kolkata or filling an online form in English for problems as mundane as faulty spelling of names or letter mismatches in a country where government documents are ubiquitous for such discrepancies. It now seems reasonable to surmise that millions of people who would otherwise be at the polling booths this month, and had voted just two years ago in general elections, will be deprived of their right.

This is not by design. The Election Commission of India (ECI) has the prerogative to clean and update its rolls — just as it has done since Independence. There is also no evidence to back claims that SIR helps insert dubious voters into the system. This newspaper has found that in a majority of states, SIR doesn't disenfranchise on caste or communal lines, instead punishing those harmed by geography, natural disasters, migration, or gender.

But the urgency of the SIR so close to the polls — despite the world's largest general elections being held on an older roll two years ago — remains unexplained. So does

the constant improvisation in rules, especially the logical discrepancy category — where Muslim-majority districts of Malda and Murshidabad have the highest number of people under adjudication — something that didn't exist in Bihar. Does this not put some voters on an unequal stance compared to their counterparts?

This reversal of the burden of proof, putting the onus of proving citizenship on the most vulnerable, is part of a worldwide phenomenon — even in countries such as the US — where any move to widen the franchise is seen with suspicion and rhetoric around undocumented immigrants dominates the discourse.

Questions have to be raised about the conduct of the West Bengal government and its political aims in apparently stonewalling the process. In no other state has the process become as tense as in Bengal. The Supreme Court, too, appears to have thrown its weight behind the SIR, and only issued procedural salvos, with the broader ruling on the challenge pending. The judges have even said that if some one can't vote this time, they

can't be deprived of their right forever. But the custodian of the voter and her trust remains ECI.

Since Shyam Saran Negi walked to his booth in the autumn of 1951 in the mountain village of Kalpa in Himachal Pradesh, becoming India's first voter, elections have been both a festival and a sacrament in India. At the heart of this process is the voter. The first roll — prepared in waiting for a republic yet to emerge — not only forged national unity but also forged citizenship and voting into something material, an article of faith. It deepened equality before law and among people, and refused to let either the wrongs of history or the animus of the present nullify the promise of its future. To have millions of people not know whether they'll be allowed to elect their representative would have been unimaginable to India's founders. It threatens to mark these Bengal elections with a permanent asterisk. This chaos is far more consequential than the eventual winner of the polls.

The views expressed are personal

SUNDAY SENTIMENTS

Karan Thapar

24 Akbar Road: Lutyen's bungalow with a history

You could be forgiven if you haven't visited the oldest and the significance of 24 Akbar Road, unless, of course, you are a member of the Congress Party. This bespoke residence in Lutyens Delhi was from January 1975 till early last year the party's head office. As Rashied Kidwai in his book *24 Akbar Road* records, seven Congress presidents presided over the party from their office in this house.

Built sometime between 1911 and 1925 by Sir Edwin Lutyens, it's a particularly fine example of British colonial architecture. It was always considered special. When he was a member of Lord Linlithgow's Executive Council, Sir Reginald Maxwell lived there. After independence, particularly fortunate ministers and MPs were allotted this bungalow.

As Kidwai writes of the property when the (India) Congress Party took it over from one of its Rajya Sabha MPs. "Facing the residence of the chief of the Indian

Air Force and the Intelligence Bureau's nodal surveillance unit, it comprised five barely furnished bedrooms, a living and dining hall and a guest room. It also has a spacious lawn at the back.

For me, however, this once gracious house is special for a different reason. In 1960, it became the residence of the Burmese ambassador to India, Daw Khin Kyi and her young daughter Aung San Suu Kyi used to live there. At the time it was called Burma House, the name given to it by Jawaharlal Nehru in recognition of the fact that Daw Khin Kyi lived there.

Daw Khin Kyi was the widow of Burma's national hero Aung San. After Aung San's assassination in 1947, months before the country's independence, Daw Khin Kyi served in U Nu's cabinet as minister for social welfare. In 1960, she was posted to Delhi where she served as Burma's ambassador for seven years becoming, during that period, the

doyen of the diplomatic corp. She was a close friend of my parents and her daughter Suu and my sister Kiran were at college together at Lady Shri Ram. We got to know them rather well.

It sounds like a boast but I was Madame Aung San's — as we all called her — favourite. As Suu teased me, I was "a roly poly" little boy. I was frequently over and Daw Khin Kyi took delight in feeding me. Perhaps I reminded her of her son from whom she had parted company.

Many are the meals of khaw suey that I have had in the old dining room of 24 Akbar Road. At the time, the speciality of the *maison* was black rice pudding. I would quaff large quantities of it. Madame Aung San would chuckle with delight whilst she watched me make a pig of myself.

At the time Suu was in her early teens and kept her hair in a plait. Though her years of politics were still decades away, she seemed to know that one day she would run the country. She was acutely conscious of what was likely to be her destiny. In 1962, she did a pencil drawing of Kiran on which she wrote, "Kiran Thapar may be allowed entry into Burma at any time."

In addition to drawing, Suu was also an adept piano player. Madame Aung San, on the other hand, was a devout Buddhist. I often accompanied her on Sundays as Wilson, her loyal driver, would negotiate her black Mercedes to

IN 1960, IT BECAME THE RESIDENCE OF THE BURMESE AMBASSADOR TO INDIA. DAW KHIN KYI AND HER YOUNG DAUGHTER AUNG SAN SUU KYI USED TO LIVE THERE. AT THE TIME IT WAS CALLED BURMA HOUSE. THE NAME WAS GIVEN TO IT BY THEN PRIME MINISTER JAWAHARLAL NEHRU

the Buddhist monasteries just beyond the Qutab. There she would regularly feed the monks and seek their blessings. I would tag along for the ride, confident that I would be heartily fed when we returned to Burma House.

I don't know how Congress treated 24 Akbar Road. But it was a beautiful home in Madame Aung San's days. It's truly a house with a history, even if what I call the better part is likely to be forgotten as it recedes into the mists of time. My intention today is to recall, perhaps for the last time, those wonderful days of yore.

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

ENGENDER

Lalita Panicker

Building an ecosystem for women entrepreneurs

The environment for women entrepreneurs in India has never been better than it is today. Thanks to focused government schemes and increasing awareness that, though they face barriers, they still have a chance to build something for themselves, more women are launching their own businesses across the country.

Businesses by women are being set up at an unprecedented pace across sectors. Kinara Capital's *MSME Insights Report 2024* analysed 44,821 micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) across six industrial states of India. It revealed that women-owned MSMEs hired 11% more women employees compared to those owned by men. The study highlighted that women-owned MSMEs were better at cost optimisation, income growth and repayment of business loans than those owned by men. This supports the fact that the social benefits of economic growth can only be maximised if women business owners are given equal opportunities to compete and succeed.

Yet, while entry barriers to entrepreneurship have reduced, scaling remains a systemic challenge. Institutional ecosystems — governments, financial institutions, industry bodies, incubators, and trade chambers — therefore, play a decisive role in determining whether women-led enterprises remain local success stories or evolve into global growth engines.

Globally, women-owned businesses account for a significant proportion of MSMEs. However, their presence declines sharply in export-intensive sectors, capital-heavy industries, and high-growth innovation ecosystems. The reasons are many: Limited access to growth capital, inadequate global networks, regulatory complexities, lack of institutional mentorship, and under-representation in industrial policy frameworks. These challenges are compounded in the Indian context. India currently ranks 57th out of 65 nations in the Mastercard Index on Women Entrepreneurship (MIWE) 2022.

Institutions must adopt structured and col-

laborative approaches that combine finance, market access, knowledge-exchange, and policy alignment. According to Priya Pansekar, director, World Trade Centre, Mumbai, global trade readiness for women entrepreneurs depends not only on financial access but also on exposure to international compliance standards, digital trade tools, and trusted global networks that enable long-term partnerships. Adding a practitioner's perspective, CA Tripti Singhal Sonani, founder, Womenovator, underlines how institutional platforms can enable access to global procurement ecosystems, cross-border collaborations, and investment networks, ensuring that women are active architects shaping the global economy's future trajectory.

A critical barrier for scaling of women-led enterprises is the persistent credit and capital access gap. While financial inclusion initiatives have improved access to micro-finance and early-stage funding, growth-stage capital remains disproportionately difficult to secure.

Kavita Adhikari, HOD, global partnerships, MSME Business Forum India, says, "Women-led enterprises continue to face a substantial credit gap. One pathway to bridge this gap is to encourage inspiring women entrepreneurs to increasingly explore manufacturing-based ventures. Compared to fragmented service-oriented or micro-cottage enterprises, manufacturing ventures often build stronger asset bases, structured cash flows, and export potential — which enhances creditworthiness and attracts long-term institutional capital."

Industrial ecosystems tend to generate scale advantages, including technology adoption, productivity gains, and global market integration. By positioning women entrepreneurs within these ecosystems, institutions can create pathways for sustainable growth. As economies seek resilient and inclusive growth models, empowering women-led enterprises to scale globally must become a key mandate.

The views expressed are personal

A little bit of Japan in the lives of Indians

"Let's go to Japan," I casually asked the missus a few months ago, with some guilt that husbands typically carry — some residual shame for performing poorly in one of the roles assigned to you. Hence, you make up for it by popping such proposals.

Mine was received well. The next step was to produce 37 gigs of documentation to prove my intentions of visiting Japan are purely tourist, and there are no plans to establish a new caliphate on the outskirts of Kyoto. After a few anxious business days, we were granted a multiple entry visa, valid for five years — a baton to beat fellow Japan-visa applicants in my peer group.

For Indians, Japan is a unique country to visit. Almost unknowingly, we have prepared all our lives for that Japan trip. It started with watching *The Jungle Book* on Doordarshan — an anime recreation of the Rudyard Kipling original by Fumio Kurosawa that was dubbed so well that it felt like it was made in Noida. For the kids of the next generation, Doraemon or Shinchan were the familiar manga characters based in the Greater Tokyo area.

Growing up in the 1990s, when you graduated from using pencils to pen, the most coveted pen was the Pilot pen — a treasure of your pencil box, a veritable status symbol. It is a wonder how a pen created by Ryoosuke Namiki in 1918

remained a hi-tech product in the classroom of the 1990s.

After school and during the summer holidays, you would visit your grandparents' parlour to play that legendary video game, Super Mario Bros — designed by Shigeru Miyamoto and Takashi Tezuka for Nintendo.

And when you were done playing, your father would come to pick you up on his Hero Honda or a Maruti Suzuki 800 — a bit late, because of the Kaizen training session at his workplace, which earned him a certificate he still treasures.

No school function would be complete without that one kid playing a tune on his "Casio" — a brand that became synonymous with its category of music synthesizers, proudly made in Shibuya. You took a Sony Walkman to college in a distant state — on those afternoons and evenings in your hostel room, those long train journeys, with no mobile internet, it was your best friend, playing all your favourite Kumar Sanu numbers.

Times changed, and you got a Honda Activa to pick "her"/him up from their coaching classes, and go try sushi at this new place.

Decades have passed, yet Japan's influence has been a constant in our lives. Imagine the parents who grew up on Fumio Kurosawa's *The Jungle Book*, their kids now swear by buying a Hayabusu. All these thoughts were swirling in my head,



For Indians, Japan is a unique country to visit. Almost unknowingly, we have prepared all our lives for that Japan trip.

as I was polishing off the meal served by the cheerful attendants of the Japan Airlines flight from Delhi to Tokyo. A seven-hour flight, where coupled with free Wi-Fi, feels like a train journey. Time seems to run faster if there is internet.

I realised, almost everyone around me was making that pilgrimage, like an Indian-origin West Indian making a trip to UP-Bihar. I was finally visiting the country of the animated *Jungle Book*, the Casio and the Pilot pen — hence, the Tokyo-Yo-Osaka itinerary. All three cities have served as the capital of Japan at some point of time in history. We were to spend three nights in each city, with a Nozomi Bullet train ride through into the mix.

We landed in Tokyo, our hotel room was in the Shinjuku district, which feels like a giant arcade game console. I got the famous egg sandwich from the airport

7-11, and also opted for a cup of coffee. Once done, I had to walk four kilometres looking for a dustbin to dispose of the coffee cup. And that's why Japan is super clean. There are no dustbins in public places. "Please put the cup in your pocket, and go to your hotel room," someone kindly suggested. And I complied.

Japan barely allowed foreigners between 1603 and 1868 — the isolationist foreign policy called *sakoku*. This was also a time when India saw many invasions. There is a reason why India and Japan, both having barely any dustbins on their streets, get diametrically opposite outcomes in terms of cleanliness. On that note, *sayonara!*

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

SUNDAY LETTERS

War wounds

This is with reference to "Vietnam to Iran: War & the lessons not learnt" by Nishtha Gautam (March 29). History watches humanity rehearse its follies while super powers sermonise virtue but manufacture ruin. Wars, marketed perversely as "guardians of peace" — bequeath ashes, orphans, and illusions as civilisations applauds.

Aditya Shekhar

The Trump brand of aggression

This is with reference to "One loser in the Gulf War is President Trump" by Karan Thapar (March 29). The American president arrogant, illogical, unrealistic, and aggressive behaviour will cause him to lose whatever charm he has among his followers and countrymen, more so when it is reflected in other decisions also.

Abhilasha Gupta

Sanjay Chopra

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Currency Control

When a central bank moves to shut down parts of a \$100-billion-plus daily market, it is not merely regulating - it is signaling distress. The recent actions by the Reserve Bank of India to curb offshore rupee trading and cap onshore positions mark one of the most forceful interventions in India's currency markets in over a decade. The message is unmistakable: stability now matters more than sophistication later.

The rupee's slide to record lows has not occurred in isolation. It reflects a convergence of pressures - geopolitical shocks, volatile capital flows, and growing concerns about trade disruptions. In such a moment, policy makers face a familiar dilemma: allow markets to discover a price, however painful, or step in to prevent disorder. The RBI has chosen the latter, relying on administrative controls rather than relying solely on interest rates or forex reserves.

In the short term, the approach appears effective. By restricting access to offshore derivative instruments and squeezing arbitrage positions, the central bank has disrupted speculative bets against the rupee. But this success comes with caveats that are harder to ignore.

Currency markets thrive on depth, participation, and the credibility of rules. Over the past decade, India has attempted to move cautiously toward greater openness - encouraging foreign participation, improving liquidity, and aligning with global financial practices. By abruptly tightening access, the central bank risks reversing these gains. Investors, particularly those operating across jurisdictions, value predictability as much as returns. Sudden constraints introduce a perception of policy risk that can linger longer than the immediate crisis has passed.

There is also a structural cost. Offshore markets, for all their imperfections, provide price signals that reflect global sentiment. Curtailing them may reduce volatility in the near term, but it also fragments the process of price discovery. A widening gap between onshore and offshore rates would not signal strength; it would indicate distortion. For businesses seeking to hedge currency exposure, this could translate into higher costs and reduced efficiency.

Yet it would be simplistic to view the RBI's actions as purely regressive. Central banks are ultimately custodians of stability, not market idealism. In moments of acute stress, orthodoxy often yields to pragmatism. The deeper question is not whether intervention was justified, but how long such measures can persist without undermining broader ambitions.

India has long aspired to elevate the rupee's global standing, aligning with the economic vision articulated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. That goal requires trust - trust in markets, in institutions, and in the continuity of policy. Temporary controls may buy time, but they cannot substitute for confidence.

The current episode, therefore, is less about the rupee's level than about India's financial trajectory. If the restrictions remain a short-lived response to exceptional conditions, they may be remembered as prudent crisis management. If they become a recurring tool, they risk signaling a retreat from openness.

In defending the currency, the central bank has drawn a line. The challenge now is ensuring that this line does not become a boundary.

Strategic Drift

When US President Donald Trump addressed the American people on the ongoing conflict with Iran, the intent was clear: project control, signal progress, and calm a nervous domestic audience. Yet what emerged instead was a portrait of strategic ambiguity at the highest level of decision-making.

Wars are not judged by rhetoric but by clarity of purpose. The United States entered this conflict with the stated aim of neutralising Iran's military capabilities. Weeks into sustained operations alongside Israel, that objective appears, at least by official claims, largely achieved. But this raises a more consequential question - if the core goals are near completion, why does the war continue, and on what terms will it end?

The absence of a defined endgame is not a minor omission; it is the central problem. Military campaigns require not only operational success but political closure. Without a clearly articulated exit strategy, even a tactically successful intervention risks evolving into a prolonged entanglement. This is particularly true in a region where conflicts have historically resisted clean endings, often mutating into cycles of retaliation and instability. Compounding this uncertainty is the unresolved status of the Strait of Hormuz. Responsible for a significant share of the world's energy transit, its effective disruption has already sent ripples through global markets. Yet Washington's position oscillates - at times asserting that the waterway will reopen naturally, at others urging allies to assume responsibility. Such inconsistency does little to reassure economies already grappling with volatility.

Equally unclear is the alignment between Washington and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government. In any joint military undertaking, coherence between partners is essential. Divergence - whether on timelines, objectives, or acceptable outcomes - can quickly erode strategic gains. The silence on this front is telling, suggesting either unresolved differences or a deliberate choice to obscure them.

There is also a deeper, domestic dimension. Rising fuel prices and declining approval ratings indicate that the economic and political costs of the conflict are beginning to register within the United States. In such a context, framing the war as a short-term "investment" becomes less persuasive, particularly when timelines remain fluid and outcomes undefined.

What this moment reveals is not simply a communication gap but a broader pattern of reactive policymaking. The shifting emphasis - from military escalation to hints of disengagement, from unilateral action to calls for allied intervention - suggests a leadership searching for equilibrium rather than executing a settled plan.

In the end, the greatest risk is not that the war will be lost on the battlefield, but that it will drift without resolution. Strategic ambiguity may offer short-term flexibility, but in conflict it often carries a longer-term cost: uncertainty, miscalculation, and the erosion of credibility. Until a coherent end state is articulated, the war will remain less a demonstration of strength than a test of direction, overseen by leaders whose motives are palpably dubious.

An Inclusive Parliament

Currently, parliamentary selection is largely governed by caste arithmetic and money power rather than governance experience. Individuals who have never managed a public institution, supervised a welfare scheme, or answered to a constituent body are routinely selected over those who have done so for years at the grassroots level. The result is a legislature that is largely detached from the actual realities of governance. Laws are made by people who have never implemented any. Budgets are voted on by people who have never administered public funds.



Constitution (Seventy-third Amendment) Act, 1992, there are now over 1.4 million elected women representatives across India's 268 lakh Gram Panchayats and rural bodies. These Sarpanches, Panchayat Samiti Presidents, and Zilla Parishad Chairpersons currently constitute 46 per cent of all local elected representatives. They are the ideal group to create the next generation of MPs and MLAs: they have a proven record of governance.

Identifying the talent pool is not enough; they must be actively trained and mentored to transition to the national stage. Women face many structural barriers: time poverty, fewer mentoring opportunities, limited access to campaign funding, and disproportionately targeted online harassment. If independent women leaders are not supported through structural reform, the reserved seats may simply be occupied by seasoned political families or business groups sponsoring proxy candidates.

To prevent this, a comprehensive capacity-building is essential, focusing on public leadership, legislative procedure, negotiation, and media engagement. Mentorship and advocacy networks must connect grassroots leaders with experienced legislators. State-level support hubs offering training in regional languages can further empower leaders early in their political journeys.

Global examples of gender quotas offer valuable lessons. Argentina, the first country to legislate a gender quota through its 1991 'Ley de Cupos', saw initial gains evaporate as parties systematically placed women in unwinnable list positions - a practice the Electoral Chamber had to prohibit later. Mexico's constitutional mandate of 'Paridad en Todo' (parity in everything) extends gender parity across the executive and judiciary. Women now hold 20-40 per cent of judicial posts, and the Supreme Court

has a female majority (5 of 9 seats). India's Supreme Court has just one woman among 34 judges.

Rwanda leads the world, with women holding over 61 per cent of parliamentary seats. It institutionalised leadership training through the National Women's Council, which identifies, trains, and mentors women with leadership potential. Women enter at the cell level, build governance experience, and rise through the system - ensuring reserved seats are filled by candidates with genuine civic participation rather than family proxies. Bolivia, too, achieved gender parity only after it invested in indigenous women's leadership networks at the community level.

Sweden's 'zipper system' alternates male and female candidates on party lists. Strong internal women's federations have helped women consistently hold over 45 per cent of seats in the Riksdag - making it one of the world's most gender-equal legislatures without formal quota laws.

In Ireland, NGOs like 'Women for Election' have tried to dismantle the 'Five Cs' that deter women from running: Cash, Childcare, Confidence, Culture, and Candidate Selection, by teaching skills in media, fundraising, and canvassing.

Not all experiences have been successful. In Jordan, reserved seats were for years dominated by women from prominent political families, effectively turning the quota into an extension of elite capture rather than independent women's leadership.

India has Rwanda's pipeline, Jordan's risk, and Ireland's barriers - the question is whether it will learn from all three before

2029. Encouragingly, the journey from Panchayat to Parliament has proven possible. President Droupadi Murmu rose from a tribal village council to become India's President. Union Minister Savitri Thakur began in a district panchayat, and Raksha Nikhil Khadse served as a village sarpanch before entering the national cabinet. Many more such success stories can be written in the near future.

The Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam has opened a historic door, forcing us to ask exactly who will lead us. To answer this, we should look at how India constitutes its High Court benches. Two-thirds of appointees are advocates from the Bar, while one-third are elevated from trial courts, judges who have managed real dockets and delivered justice under resource constraints. Both streams are legitimate and necessary. A legislature that selects almost exclusively for political connections, while ignoring proven governance records, appears far less rationally designed than the judiciary.

To fix this, Parliament must institutionalise a universal Grassroots Leadership quota. An amendment to the Representation of the People Act, 1951 can mandate that a substantial proportion of all parliamentary and assembly seats, for both men and women alike, be contested only by candidates who have successfully completed a full elected term in a local self-government body. The precise proportion of seats designated under the quota is a matter for parliamentary deliberation.

In addition, a statutory electoral empowerment fund, modelled on Sweden's publicly financed election systems, should be considered to support first-time grassroots candidates. Sweden's paritid provides grants at the municipal and county levels, meaning funding reaches well below the national tier. It is time to insist that a guaranteed, considerable share of those entering national leadership are leaders tested at the grassroots level.



SRIMIVA MADHAV
The writer is a transparency and equality advocate and founder member, SLABI Foundation

The Government of India is reportedly holding a special session of Parliament to expedite the implementation of the Constitution (One Hundred and Sixth Amendment) Act, 2023, for the 2029 general elections. The law mandates 33 per cent reservation for women in the Lok Sabha and state Assemblies, promising a historic leap in strengthening women's leadership in governance.

An anticipated expansion of the Lok Sabha to 816 seats would raise women's representation from 74 (31.6 per cent) to 273 (33 per cent). At the state level, increasing Assembly strength from 3997 to about 6000 would require nearly 2,000 women legislators, up from just 390 today.

Women hold just 27.2 per cent of seats in national parliaments globally. India now has a chance to surpass this. However, the sheer scale of India's transformation creates an immediate leadership vacuum: from where will so many women leaders come?

Currently, parliamentary selection is largely governed by caste arithmetic and money power rather than governance experience. Individuals who have never managed a public institution, supervised a welfare scheme, or answered to a constituent body are routinely selected over those who have done so for years at the grassroots level. The result is a legislature that is largely detached from the actual realities of governance. Laws are made by people who have never implemented any. Budgets are voted on by people who have never administered public funds.

The answer lies in a talent pool India has already spent over three decades cultivating: the Panchayat Raj system. Under the

The Daily Star

An inspiring case of women's empowerment

We congratulate Prime Minister Balendra Shah, who was sworn in on Friday, for ushering in the promise of restoring political stability and creating jobs for the poor - aspirations of the Nepzuping that led to this new government in Nepal. Its formation marks a decisive political shift in Nepal that is both generational and institutional.

It is heartening that Shah has appointed five women ministers in his 15-member cabinet, ensuring for the first time, 33 percent female representation and thus fulfilling Nepal's constitutional requirement. Encouragingly, the women ministers have been given important portfolios - law, agriculture, general administration, justice and parliamentary affairs, health and population, and women and children affairs. Moreover, 96 women became

members of parliament - the highest so far in Nepal's history - though only 14 were directly elected, reflecting the age-old male chauvinism of political parties with regard to nominations.

There are criticisms regarding the low number of candidates nominated by the winning party and the choice of women candidates for the proportional representation seats. But the presence of a significantly higher number of women in parliament is certainly encouraging.

This is even more apparent when we compare Nepal's case with the state of women's representation in Bangladesh's new parliament - also formed through a free and fair election following a people's uprising that was largely led by students. However, unlike Nepal's parliament, we

have only seven elected women MPs, with only three in a cabinet where 94 percent of the posts are filled by men.

Most of the political parties participating in the elections failed to nominate even five percent of women candidates, despite pledging to do so under the July National Charter. Even BNP nominated only 10 women candidates; 30 out of 50 parties did not nominate a single candidate.

For a parliament that has evolved from a people's uprising without discrimination being the key driving philosophy, it has failed miserably in increasing women's political participation. This reflects Bangladesh's entrenched patriarchal culture that has excluded women from real empowerment, especially in the political arena. Political parties, in particular, have not

lived up to our democratic expectations in terms of gender inclusivity. Bangladesh's parliament has yet to appoint MPs for the 50 women's reserved seats. We hope that the selections will be based on merit and capability rather than party loyalty or connection and that, unlike in the past, these seats will not be examples of tokenism. Women MPs' voices must be heard and their opinions given importance while passing legislation.

In the case of Nepal's parliament, only one will tell whether the appointment of women ministers and the selection of women MPs through PR have been prudent. But just the fact that there is 33 percent representation in the Nepali cabinet with women ministers holding important portfolios is something the rest of South Asia should appreciate and emulate in the future.



Letters To The Editor | ✉ editor@thestatesman.com

Qualified

Sir, The article 'Pre-certified Leaders Vital for India's Needs' by Anil Senagupta published on 2 April, pinpoints a necessity for a Political Leaders Selection Test (PLST). The PLST would be similar in spirit to the UPSC examination, but designed specifically for aspiring legislators. A basic qualifying score should be a minimum requirement to join the pool of contestants in elections, whether as independent candidates or those affiliated with political parties.

The author states that about 900 million voters in our country elect representatives who shape the laws, budget, and all other important aspects of governance. Almost all government officials, from the B.D.O. level to the Chief Secretary, from a Sub-judge to the Chief Justice of the High Court or Supreme Court, are required to pass competitive examinations.

In defence as well, from a lieutenant to the chiefs of the Army, Navy, and Air Force, selection follows rigorous testing. Similarly,

doctors and engineers must qualify through competitive examinations before entering their professions.

Why, then, should those who form a vital part of governance not be required to pass a qualifying test?

The author has rightly stated that democracies thrive on choice, but meaningful choice must come from qualified candidates, which the PLST could help ensure. There would, of course, be many obstacles in implementing such a system in a large and diverse country like ours. However, if implemented in the manner suggested by the author, this could help India progress towards becoming a truly developed nation.

Yours, etc., Ranjit Kumar Guha Roy, Mississauga, Canada, 3 April.

Speaking up

Sir, Memory and truth are increasingly being treated as inconveniences in our times. When voices that remember, record and speak are censored or banned, society is

pushed towards a dangerous culture of forgetting.

As Faiz wrote, "Bol ke lab azad hai tera" and it is this refusal to be silenced that keeps democracy alive.

Modern day Mahatma Gandhis, who resist this culture of enforced silence, continue to infuse the rest of us with hope and moral courage.

Yours, etc., Harsh Pawaria, Rohtak, 2 April.

Consequences

Sir, Please refer to yesterday's report 'Trump strongly considering NATO pullout'. The possibility of the United States stepping away from the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation is no longer a fringe concern whispered in diplomatic corridors; it is now a live political question with far-reaching consequences.

NATO was born out of a hard historical lesson: that disunity invites aggression. Its founding principle - that an attack on one

member would be treated as an attack on all - was not simply a military clause but a political deterrent. It worked precisely because it was credible.

During the Cold War, that credibility helped prevent direct confrontation between superpowers. In the decades since, it has adapted to new threats, from terrorism to regional instability, while expanding its membership and reach.

Its invocation after the attacks of 11 September 2001, demonstrated that the alliance was not a one-way guarantee for Europe but a mutual compact that could be mobilised in defence of the United States itself.

To dismiss such an institution as obsolete or ineffective is to overlook both its historical function and its continuing strategic value. Thus, the mere suggestion that Washington could loosen, or even sever, its commitment marks a profound shift in global power equations.

Yours, etc., Khokan Das, Kolkata, 3 April.

FRUIT OF DESIRE

Fifty years after three young men launched Apple out of a California bedroom, the technology firm is today the second most valued company in the world. Its \$4 trillion valuation is greater than India's GDP. More than two billion Apple devices are in use globally. Yet, what makes the company unique is not only the wealth and the popularity it represents but also its deep cultural imprint across the world. Phones, computer and other personal technology-driven devices are ubiquitous in the modern world. But very few of them evoke the kind of passion that Apple products do among their customers. Apple built its distinctive identity not by pushing great technological innovations but through design: its products are sleek, attractive and easy to use. To its legion of admirers, the company's gadgets are art disguised as technology. Marketing undoubtedly has played a key role in the company's cult status. Its founder, Steve Jobs, in particular, made the launch of each new product a much-awaited affair that was followed by millions with anticipation. This helped Apple make its lure global: after the launch of a new product, long queues of customers eager to get their hands on the product snake around the firm's stores in every major city, whether it is Boston or Bengaluru.

In many ways, Apple has also emerged as a poster child of globalisation. Apple uses components from dozens of countries. Most devices are assembled by Taiwanese companies such as Foxconn but in Chinese factories from where they are shipped around the world. China and Taiwan may not

see eye to eye. Neither do China and the United States of America. But most Apple devices are a combination of efforts and investment from all three nations. Of late, as political pushback in the US against overseas manufacturing has grown, Apple has increased its domestic production footprint. In 2025, the company announced it would invest \$500 million in the US over four years. At the same time, Apple has also moved some of its assembly facilities from China to India to reduce its dependence on the former.

Despite all its successes, Apple is also a cautionary tale. As a creature of a globalised economy, it is not immune to contemporary pushbacks against globalisation. As with its pivot towards US manufacturing in the face of political pressure, it is fundamentally — and unsurprisingly — a corporate entity that must secure the mechanisms that ensure access to mar-

At 50, Apple reveals the power and the perils of modern consumerism

kets and profits from the predations of the modern, hawkish State. That is also exhibited in other ways: Apple has its own operating system, web of apps, and parallel platforms that cannot be used alongside comparable systems on other phones or laptops. This has led to rising litigations between the company and governments and their surveillance architectures demanding access to Apple's encrypted data. Apart from privacy, labour rights are another contentious issue that has shadowed Apple.

Ultimately, Apple's journey reveals as both the power and the perils of modern consumerism. It is hard to stop once one takes a bite. But every bite comes at a cost.

SCRIPSI

'The most important thing I've learned about writing is never write too much at a time... Never pump yourself dry. Leave a little for the next day. The main thing is to know when to stop. Don't wait till you've written yourself out. When you're still going good and you come to an interesting place and you know what's going to happen next, that's the time to stop. Then leave it alone and don't think about it; let your subconscious mind do the work.'

MARK TWAIN

DELHI DIARIES

Door open

Key ministers in the Narendra Modi-led government at the Centre continue to draw a steady stream of current and former parliamentarians to their offices when Parliament is in session. However, the heaviest footfall is often witnessed outside the offices of the Union home minister, Amit Shah, and the Union road transport and highways minister, Nitin Gadkari. Both offices are located in the same row on the ground floor of Parliament House. Despite their proximity, the two offices function very differently. Visitors seeking a one-on-one meeting with Shah often face a long waiting time, reflecting a tightly structured schedule. Gadkari's office, in contrast, follows an open-door approach, allowing MPs to walk in freely and directly raise issues related to national highway projects in their constituencies. The contrast extends beyond accessibility. Gadkari, known for his culinary enthusiasm, frequently offers home-cooked snacks to visitors. MPs across party lines, along with their aides, are encouraged to sample Marathi and South Indian dishes. 'Iska suad, bhikku different hai. Ghar ka hai, mera recipe hai... try karo,' Gadkari is often heard telling his guests. Shah's office, on the other hand, maintains a more formal arrangement, with refreshments sourced from the Parliament canteen. This underscores the contrasting atmospheres in the offices of the two high-profile ministers.

Veteran voice

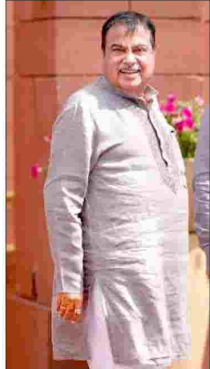
Kerala's electoral theatre has long featured the star campaigner of the United Democratic Front, AK Antony, leading road shows from Kasaragod to Thiruvananthapuram. But since the 2024 Lok Sabha election, the 85-year-old had been staying away from active politics. His critical statements have previously drawn the ire of the Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led Left Democratic Front and the National Democratic Alliance, particularly during the 2021 assembly polls when he helped shape the political narrative.

This time, Antony held a presser at Indira Bhawan, the state Congress headquarters, and predicted a clean sweep for the UDF. He also maintained that the rank and file in the CPI(M) are disillusioned with the top brass and would prefer to see the LDF in the Opposition.

Mister flashpoint

The chief minister of Assam, Himanta Biswa Sarma, turned up the political heat in the poll-bound

state on Thursday by accusing the mother of Kunki Chowdhury — the London-educated, 27-year-old candidate of the Opposition Assam Jatiya Parishad — of sharing photographs of consuming beef on social media, challenging sanatan dharma, backing figures such as Sharjeel Inam and Umar Khalid, supporting the 'cutting off the Chicken's Neck corridor', and claiming that Pakistan is



Open-door policy

not an enemy country. Sarma even questioned the BJP leadership for fielding Chowdhury, the youngest candidate in the polls from the Central Guwahati constituency. She is pitted against the BJP veteran, Vijay Kumar Gupta.

Chowdhury and her mother politely refuted the accusations. As a political debutant, Chowdhury also thanked the CM for bringing national attention to her background and campaign. Chowdhury's maternal great-grandfather, Ari Bahadur Gurung, was a barrister and a signatory to the Constitution. The contro-

Footnote

Some Delhi police officers are privately amused by the Aam Aadmi Party siren, Raghad Chhadha. But they are also wondering that Chhadha might have the last laugh if he finds favour with the BJP. A senior cop recalled that Chhadha was a nuisance for law enforcement during the 2019 Lok Sabha polls when he contested from South Delhi. He would frequently call IPS officers on their personal numbers, accuse them of being backed by the BJP. The police would rush to the spot only to find that the complaint was false. But Chhadha's proximity to power across party lines is a worry for officers. They would rather deal with career politicians, whom they find to be predictable and dependable, unlike the 37-year-old AAP upstart.

Michel Foucault in the age of Artificial Intelligence Person to process

DEBASHIS CHAKRABARTI

In the centenary year of Michel Foucault's birth, Artificial Intelligence has not merely vindicated his most famous provocation but it has also exposed its limits. The 'death of the author' now coincides with a deeper historic rupture: the exhaustion of postmodernism itself in an age where discourse is automated, owned, and scaled beyond human intention.

The age of AI has transformed what once read as philosophical provocation into technical fact. Texts now circulate without writers. Arguments appear without intention. Style persists without experience. Meaning reproduces itself without belief.

This is often taken as proof of Foucault's prescience. But to stop there would be to miss the more unsettling implication. AI does not simply confirm the 'death of the author'; it marks the point at which that death ceases to be critical and becomes infrastructural. The author has not vanished into freedom; authorship has been absorbed into systems of production, ownership, and control. What remains is postmodernism's historical role as a language of critique.

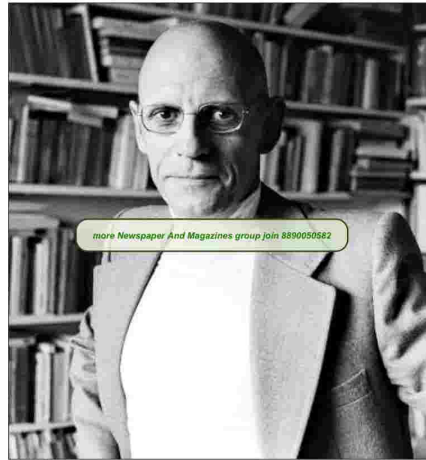
When Foucault delivered 'What is an Author?' in 1969, he was intervening in a specific intellectual and political conjuncture. The Romantic figure of the author — a sovereign, expressive, originary — had become an ideological anchor for authority, property, and truth. To dismantle that figure was to weaken inherited hierarchies of meaning.

Foucault's move was surgical. The author, he argued, was not a simple origin of texts but a regulatory function — the way societies classify, police, and distribute discourse. Writing did not flow from interior genius but from historically structured fields of knowledge, from what he called the episteme. Language preceded intention. Discourse spoke through subjects, not the other way around.

In the late twentieth century, this was emancipatory. It cracked the foundations of cultural authority. It allowed feminism, postcolonial theory, and critical historiography to flourish. Postmodernism became the philosophical mood of this dismantling. But postmodernism was always parasitic on a specific condition: the persistence of human authorship even as it was being critiqued.

AI changes the terrain entirely. Large language models generate text

Debashis Chakrabarti is a political commentator and Commonwealth Fellow (UK)



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without consciousness, memory, or intention. They do not mean; they correlate. They do not argue; they approximate. They operate by metabolising the accumulated archive of human discourse and predicting the statistically plausible next word. This is not creativity in the human sense; it is the automation of discursivity. What appears uncanny is not that machines 'sound human', but that they reveal how much of human writing already functioned as pattern, convention, and repetition. In this sense, AI literalises Foucault's claim: discourse does not require a sovereign subject.

Yet this literalisation drains the claim of its critical force. What was once a challenge to authority becomes a mechanism for its expansion. The author-function no longer organises discourse for interpretation; it is replaced by platforms that organise discourse for optimisation.

Postmodernism thrived on destabilisation — of truth, of identity, of meaning. Its intellectual power lay in revealing contingency where certainty had been assumed. But AI has shown that contingency alone is politically inert. When discourse becomes endlessly reproducible, ambiguity ceases to threaten power. It feeds it. AI systems do not resolve meaning; they

scale it. Irony becomes a style. Dissent becomes content. Critique becomes data. The very tools postmodernism developed to unmask authority are now absorbed into the machinery that governs communication.

This is the historical irony of Foucault's century: the disappearance of the author no longer liberates discourse from power. It liberates power from accountability.

One of the most striking features of the AI moment is the inversion of authority. Texts generated without identifiable authors often appear more objective, more neutral, more trustworthy. Their lack of biography becomes a form of credibility. Their impersonality reads as expertise.

This is a profound political shift. Authority migrates from persons to processes, from responsibility to systems. When no one reads, no one can be held to account. The disappearance of the author no longer disperses power; it concentrates it in opaque technical and corporate structures.

Foucault's analyses of power were incisive but incomplete. He traced how institutions discipline bodies and how knowledge produces subjects. But he underestimated how deeply capital would come to organise discourse itself.

AI is not merely a philosophical

problem. It is a political-economic one. Language models are trained on collective human expression and enclosed as proprietary assets. The cultural commons becomes raw material. Meaning becomes extractable value.

Postmodernism, suspicious of grand narratives, struggled to articulate systemic economic critique. It faltered at deconstruction but excelled at reconstruction. In the age of AI, this limitation becomes fatal. Without political economy, critique dissolves into style.

What then, dies with postmodernism? Not its insights, but its historical function. The refusal of foundations, once radical, now mirrors the logic of platforms that thrive on endless circulation without commitment. Relativism, once subversive, now lurks as an endgame that profits from confusion and overload.

In this environment, postmodern irony reads less like resistance than resignation. The world no longer needs to be persuaded that truth is unstable; it needs to be governed amid instability.

What then remains after the author?

The task is not to resurrect the Romantic author or to deny the insights of Foucault. It is to move beyond a theory of discourse that ends where responsibility begins. The present demands a renewed account of agency — distributed but not dissolved, collective but not anonymous.

The central question is no longer epistemological but political: who owns the infrastructures through which meaning is produced, circulated, and consumed?

Foucault remains indispensable for understanding how power works through knowledge. But the age of AI reveals what his framework left untheorised: the fusion of discourse, technology, and capital at planetary scale.

The death of the author was once a philosophical shock. Today, it is an operational reality. The death of postmodernism follows — not because it was wrong, but because it was historically bounded.

AI marks a transition from critique to demands for renewed responsibility. It forces intellectuals, policymakers, and movements to confront a world where language itself has become infrastructure, and where meaning circulates faster than judgment. In that world, the question is no longer whether critics exist, but whether responsibility can survive without them. Foucault's century, arriving in the age of machines that speak without knowing, demands not celebration but reckoning.

Human eye

Sir — All the technological progress in the world cannot replace what the human eye and careful attention can achieve. Cambridge University's decision to return to the plan of the eye drawings by John Stevens Henslow — Charles Darwin's teacher — to teach botany highlights

this truth. Students who sketch plants learn to notice structure and variation. Digital resources remain valuable, yet observation encourages deeper thinking. Educational institutions should emphasise fieldwork and drawing alongside technology. This will help students understand science clearly and engage with nature more meaningfully.

A.K. Sen, Calcutta

Beat the heat

Sir — Even as election fever rises in the country, the mercury is trending upwards too. Heat waves during election season demand serious planning. Millions of voters will stand outdoors in dangerously high, wet-bulb temperatures. The India Meteorological Department has already warned of hotter days in April. Polling booths need shaded queues, drinking water, and medical support. Campaign rallies should avoid mid-day hours. Local authorities must coordinate transport for elderly voters. Clear announcements about heat precautions will help communities. Elections must remain accessible without risking public health. Immediate action is necessary before polling begins across states this summer period ahead.

Abhilasha Gupta, Calcutta

Sir — Polling booths in rural areas often lack shade, water and other basic medical provisions needed to deal with heat strokes. Campaign rallies should include oral rehydration salts and monitor vulnerable groups. Community health workers can guide voters about symptoms such as dizziness

and weakness. Political parties must shorten speeches at rallies to reduce heat exposure. Transport schedules should avoid peak heat hours. Public messaging in regional languages will improve understanding and encourage safer participation in the polls.



Too hot

These steps will reduce preventable illness during large election gatherings this year.

Aditya Kamble, Mumbai

Moon matters

Sir — The Moon is suddenly a crowded place ('Pie in the sky', April 4). The Artemis II mission highlights how space exploration now reflects geopolitical competition. The United States of America seeks to shape lunar governance through partnerships and operational presence. China's planned crewed mission and International

Lunar Research Station add urgency to this contest. Countries including India, Japan, and Canada have already announced initiatives. Space exploration therefore carries strategic implications beyond science. Policymakers must ensure cooperation remains central to avoid future tensions.

Rajat Kanti Das, Calcutta

Sir — Astronauts travelling around the Moon now carry geopolitical expectations alongside scientific goals. Artemis II reflects the US's attempt to build alliances in cis-lunar space. China's parallel efforts through the ILRS indicate competing frameworks. India's Chandrayaan missions demonstrate growing participation from emerging powers. Access to lunar resources and infrastructure will influence future missions. Governments should promote transparency and cooperation.

Binita Singh, New Delhi

Sir — The Moon appears distant, yet geopolitical rivalry has reached its orbit. Artemis II signals the US's intention to shape future lunar infrastructure near the lunar South Pole may influence resource access.

Chaitali Ghosh, Calcutta

Letters should be sent to: The Telegraph, 6 Prafulla Sarker Street, Calcutta 700011, tedit@abp.in

Nutrition should be a life-skill for our kids

RAJDEEP PATHAK

A child today does not learn about food first from a classroom, a parent, or even a textbook. More often, the first lessons come from packaging, jingles, cartoon mascots, celebrity endorsements, delivery apps, and the glowing screens that turn snacks into status. Before a child understands what protein does, he may already know which chips are 'cool'. Before they learn why water matters, they may have memorized the logo of a sugary drink. Recent data suggests a glaring disparity in the information ecosystem of our children. For every one message they receive about hydration or balanced nutrition, they are bombarded with roughly 50 advertisements for ultra-processed foods (UPFs) high in fat, salt, and sugar.

That is not a trivial cultural shift. It is a public health crisis disguised as 'consumer freedom'. India today is living with what nutrition experts call a dual burden of malnutrition—persistent under-nutrition on one side, and rising overweight, obesity, and diet-related disease on the other. In many homes, these are no longer separate realities. One child may be undernourished, while another family member is already at risk of diabetes, fatty liver, or hypertension. UNICEF India notes that poor nutrition in India is not simply about 'too little' food. Often it is also about unhealthy, low-diversity diets and micronutrient deficiencies. Good nutrition, it reminds us, is fundamental not only to survival but to learning, growth, and lifelong well-being.

The World Health Organization has repeatedly warned that children remain heavily exposed to the marketing of foods high in saturated fats, sugars and salt, and that such

marketing affects not only food preferences but purchase requests, dietary intake and even the norms children develop around food itself. WHO's 2023 guideline calls for stronger, mandatory protections because self-regulation has proved inadequate, especially in the digital era. (<https://www.who.int/publications/item/97892400105423>)

India has not been indifferent to this challenge. The country has expanded food support through programmes such as 'PM POSHAN', school meals, 'POSHAN' initiatives, anaemia reduction campaigns, and school health efforts. 'PM POSHAN' itself explicitly aims not only to improve attendance and retention but also to improve children's nutritional levels, with convergence around micronutrients and school health.

As policymakers gathered at the 2026 Nutrition Conclave in Delhi on 13 March 2026, by 'Nourishing Schools Foundation', 'Food Future Foundation', and partners, focusing on behaviour change, child nutrition, and policy outcomes, a consensus emerged that was as much about pedagogy as it was about public health. The policy makers believed that India's nutrition crisis can no longer be solved by feeding programmes alone. To combat a marketing machine that spends billions to shape a child's palate, nutrition education must move from the fringes of so-called extra-curricular activities, to the very core of the school curriculum.

India is currently caught in a unique and dangerous demographic pincer movement. On one hand, the United Nations' 2025 State of Food Security and Nutrition (SOFI) report highlights that India still grapples with the world's highest rate of child wasting (18.7 per cent). On the other, the Economic Survey 2025-26 warns of an exploding

childhood obesity epidemic, with over 3.3 crore children currently classified as obese, a figure projected to soar to 8.3 crore by 2035.

This dual burden of malnutrition is no longer a tale of two Indias. Today, stunting and obesity often coexist within the same neighbourhoods, and sometimes the same households. The root cause is frequently the same, which is a profound lack of 'nutrition literacy'. We have expanded food access through monumental schemes like 'PM Poshan' and 'Poshan Abhiyaan 2.0', thereby ensuring millions receive a daily meal. But access without education is a half-measure. Providing a meal satisfies hunger for the afternoon, but teaching children why that meal matters protects them for a lifetime. On the other hand, a child may receive a nutritious meal in school and still spend the rest of the day aspiring to the brightly marketed foods that dominate television, neighbourhood shops, and smart-phone feeds. This is where public policy often stops too early. We have tried to feed the child, but not sufficiently to educate the chooser.

That is why nutrition education (read literacy) must no longer be treated as an occasional awareness drive, a poster on a wall, or a forgettable chapter before examination. It must become part of how children learn to live. We must understand that nutrition is not merely about calories. It is about overall growth and development.

Children form habits before they form ideologies. Their taste, appetite, reward systems and food routines are shaped long before adulthood. If unhealthy consumption becomes normal in childhood, later correction becomes much harder. Schools therefore are not just places of instruction; they are one of the last



democratic spaces where society can intervene before lifelong patterns settle in. Therefore, a nutrition-literate child does not simply identify carbohydrates, proteins and fats for marks. That child begins to ask practical questions like 'why does a packet snack feel satisfying for ten minutes but leave me hungry again?' 'Why does a meal of dal, rice and vegetables keep me fuller longer?' 'Why do sugary drinks create bursts of energy followed by lethargy?' 'Why is a colourful label not the same thing as a healthy product?'

These are not elite questions. They are survival questions for the twenty-first century. The case for schools is especially strong because schools are among the few institutions that still reach children across class, caste, region, and social background. Therefore, a well-designed nutrition curriculum can do what most health messaging fails to do.

'Down to Earth' reports that the Indian government, guided by recommendations in the Economic Survey 2025-26 (released January 2026), is accelerating a shift in public health policy from merely ensuring food availability to regulating the consumption of unhealthy food through education and restriction. Facing a rapid surge in ultra-processed food (UPF) consumption and childhood obesity, the policy focus is combining, what they call, a 'marketing shield' with an 'educational shield'. (<https://www.downtoearth.in/ultra-processed-food-consumption-recommendations-higher-upt>)

In this direction, the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) has already laid groundwork with the 'Eat Right School' programme, which uses 'Yellow Books'—activity books available in 11 languages to teach food safety and nutrition to students. The goal is to move from theoretical knowledge to practical life skills, such as reading nutrition labels and making healthier food choices. But here lies the danger—if nutrition education is introduced badly, it will fail. Children do not need another dry, moralising chapter that reduces food to guilt, fear, or memorised diagrams, or be shamed about what is in their tiffin boxes. They need something much more intelligent, where they are practically taught how food fuels energy, growth, concentration and immunity, while helping them understand the everyday importance of protein, fibre, iron, calcium and hydration. They need to be taught in creative ways what processed and ultra-processed foods mean in real life, how to read food labels, how advertising shapes cravings through colour and celebrity, and why traditional diets often hold valuable nutritional wisdom worth preserving.

As we move toward the 2030 global nutrition targets, India has the opportunity to lead the world in school-based health interventions. By making nutrition education as fundamental as literacy and numeracy, we can ensure that the next generation isn't just 'fed', but truly nourished. Moreover, in an age where the marketplace speaks to children all day, the classroom cannot afford to whisper.

(The writer is Programme Executive, Gandhi Smriti and Darshan Samiti.)

NOW AND AGAIN

MY IMMEDIATE WORLD

CHANDER GUPTA

As I am with chronic osteoarthritis in my knees, my mobility to travel has been substantially restricted, especially after I crossed the age of 65 in 2024. I find myself tied to my hometown Panchkula and adjacent cities due to fitness issues, despite being able to afford travel financially, and not facing any constraint of time after retirement.

Broadly, as my residence is located in what is known as the Tricity, my home turf consists of the Union Territory of Chandigarh, Panchkula (in Haryana), and Mohali (in Punjab). Without letting my enthusiasm be dampened even a bit by the restrictions imposed by health conditions to travel to tourist places in India and abroad, I have shifted my focus on exploring the world within the confines of my immediate world—the tricity.

As I resolved to see the immediate world, I began to realise that there were so many locations and places I had never visited. One such place I visited for the first time is the Government College of Art in Sector 10 of Chandigarh. Not only did I interact with the faculty about the courses being offered by GCA, I also visited the studios of the Painting, Sculpture, Graphics, and Applied Arts courses. I also visited the adjoining Government Museum and Art Gallery.

The other day, I visited Chandigarh Architecture Museum with family. Before embarking on my mission to explore my home domain, I had not even heard about this museum.

Recently I attended a Book event at the Art Museum Auditorium organised under the aegis of Punjab Lit Foundation. There was a conversation on the book 'A World Adrift' with the author Manish Tiwari.

In my quest to see the world within my city (or tricity), I visited for the first time the precincts of CRRIID, Sector 19, Chandigarh on 24 January for attending an event celebrating 75 years of the making of Chandigarh. It was a treat listening to insightful lectures delivered by renowned French urbanist Alain Bertaud and renowned architect of the new Parliament, Bimal Patel. I also saw a documentary, 'The Eternal Modernist', dedicated to a key figure of modern architecture in Chandigarh, SD Sharma, screened at Alliance Française de Chandigarh on March 14.

To reconnect with the Panjab University Campus, my alma mater, I attended the Global Alumni Meet. I was stupefied to find the name of the Department of English (where I studied for an M.A. degree) had been changed to the Department of English and Cultural Studies. Another day, I saw some great artwork in the Fine Arts Museum, associated with the Department of Art History and Visual Arts in the campus. One fine day, I was part of a group of former classmates of the Department of English which held a get-together at the iconic Students Centre in the campus after 45 years.

There is so much to explore within the vast world of the Tricity that I hardly miss the world beyond.

News Items

FRENCH TARIFFS

CHAMBER PASS BILL FOR HIGHER RATES

Paris, April.

The Chamber has passed by 311 vote to 39 the Bill increasing by 30 per cent the Customs duty on all goods, with exception of tobacco, newspaper, corn, coffee, cocoa, and the component parts of agricultural Machinery.—Reuter.

GREEK ELECTIONS

CLAIMS OF RIVAL CANDIDATES

Athens, April.

Excitement is being intensified on the approach of the Presidential Election on April 4 to replace M. Concoritouris, who has resigned ostensibly for personal reasons and has declined the Premier's request to continue in office.

The ex-Minister M. Demerdji's nomination to the Presidency has provoked the hostility of M. Pangalos on the ground that the candidature of the monarchist is against the military. Strong efforts are being made to persuade the veteran statesman M. Zaimis to stand and if these fail M. Pangalos will lodge his own candidacy. M. Pangalos has issued a vigorous manifesto promising to lead the nation to security out of anarchy.—Reuter.

LADY WILSON

TAKEN TO LONDON HOSPITAL IN MOTOR AMBULANCE

(From Our Special Representative.) London, April.

Sir Leslie Wilson, Governor of Bombay, and Lady Wilson landed at Tilbury to-day after an anxious voyage from India.

Lady Wilson was taken ashore in a stretcher and by motor ambulance to the London Hospital of Tropical Diseases where she is being treated by specialists. Lady Wilson's illness is puzzling because her health had improved since she went to India in 1924.

Are we feeding the soil or the market?

DEBAPRIYA MUKHERJEE

In recent years, organic farming has come to occupy a powerful moral position in public discourse. Farmers' markets, government programmes and consumer movements increasingly portray organic agriculture as the inevitable path toward sustainable food production. More recently, the idea of natural farming—promising cultivation without external inputs—has added another dimension to this enthusiasm. Yet beneath this growing popularity lies a question that farmers and consumers rarely ask: are we truly understanding the natural fertility of soil, or are we merely replacing chemical inputs with commercially promoted organic ones?

My own experience with paddy cultivation compelled me to reflect deeply on this question. My understanding of organic and natural farming did not begin in books or policy debates but in my own field. Encouraged by the widespread enthusiasm surrounding organic agriculture, I decided to cultivate rice using vermicompost and cow dung—two inputs widely promoted as the foundation of sustainable farming. With genuine optimism, I applied these materials carefully, believing they would restore soil fertility and enhance crop productivity in a natural way.

The results, however, were not what I had anticipated. The growth of the paddy crop was not particularly

impressive, and the final yield remained far from satisfactory. This outcome was surprising because organic farming is frequently presented as a reliable path to improved soil health and better crop quality. Instead of witnessing dramatic improvement, I realised that the relationship between soil, nutrients and plant growth is far more complex than the simplified prescriptions often promoted.

The problem is compounded by the absence of scientific support at the local level. In many rural areas, including my village, farmers have no access to facilities for proper soil analysis. Without laboratory testing, it is almost impossible to understand the existing nutrient status of the soil, its microbial activity, or its organic matter content. As a result, recommendations such as 'apply vermicompost' or 'use cow dung manure' often become routine advice rather than scientifically guided agricultural practice. Equally concerning is the lack of facilities to analyse the harvested crops itself. Organic agriculture is frequently associated with claims of superior nutritional quality—higher antioxidant levels, better micronutrient balance and healthier grains.

Global scientific research has undoubtedly contributed to the popularity of organic farming. Over the past three decades, numerous studies have reported improvements in soil health, biodiversity and ecological sustainability under organic management. For example, long-term agricultural experiments reported in journals

such as Nature Communications and Agriculture, Ecosystems & Environment have shown that organic farming systems often contain higher soil organic carbon and greater microbial activity than conventional systems. These biological processes strengthen nutrient cycling and may enhance the long-term resilience of agricultural ecosystems.

Organic farming also appears to support biodiversity. Several comparative studies have shown that organic farms tend to host more insects, birds, and soil organisms because they avoid synthetic pesticides and maintain more diverse cropping systems. Research published in PLOS ONE and related environmental journals has highlighted how such biodiversity contributes to ecological services such as pollination and natural pest control.

Yet scientific literature also presents an important caution. The success of organic farming is highly dependent on local conditions. Soil type, climate, crop variety, and existing nutrient levels all influence agricultural outcomes. Simply replacing chemical fertilisers with organic inputs does not automatically restore soil fertility. When compost or manure is applied without understanding the soil's biological and chemical characteristics, the results may remain uncertain.

Another concern frequently highlighted in international research relates to productivity. Several global analyses comparing organic and conventional farming have suggested that organic

crop yields are often lower on average. Some studies reported in Nature Communications estimate that organic yields may be roughly 15-20 per cent lower, although the difference varies widely depending on crop type and management practices.

If productivity declines significantly, larger areas of land may be required to produce the same amount of food. This raises a difficult question for environmental policy: could large-scale adoption of organic farming unintentionally increase pressure on forests and natural ecosystems? Sustainable agriculture must therefore balance ecological benefits with the practical need to ensure food security.

Yield stability is another issue. Organic farming relies heavily on ecological processes such as natural pest control and biological nutrient cycling. While these processes are environmentally beneficial, they can also make crop production more sensitive to climatic fluctuations, pest outbreaks, and soil fertility variations. It is within this context that the growing interest in natural farming becomes particularly significant. Natural farming encourages farmers to minimise external inputs and instead rely on the inherent biological processes of soil ecosystems. The philosophy is attractive because it emphasises harmony with nature rather than intervention.

However, large-scale scientific evidence supporting the productivity of natural farming remains limited.

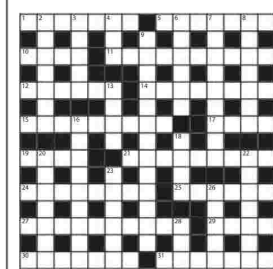
Early experiences suggest that while input costs may decline, yields can remain uncertain, particularly during the transition period. For small farmers with limited land, such uncertainty may represent a serious economic risk. These debates ultimately point to a deeper truth: soil is not merely an inert medium waiting to receive nutrients. It is a living ecosystem inhabited by billions of microorganisms, fungi, insects, and earthworms that continuously recycle organic matter and release nutrients essential for plant growth.

Nature itself offers a striking example. Forest ecosystems maintain extraordinary fertility without fertilisers or compost applications. Through the continuous cycle of leaf fall, microbial decomposition and nutrient recycling, these systems sustain themselves for centuries.

The future of sustainable agriculture may therefore depend less on replacing one set of inputs with another and more on rediscovering the biological intelligence of the soil. When farmers begin to understand soil as a living system rather than a passive container of nutrients, agriculture can move closer to genuine sustainability. In the end, the real challenge before agriculture is not choosing between organic or natural farming, but learning how to restore the living intelligence of the soil while still feeding a hungry world.

(The writer is a former Senior Scientist, Central Pollution Control Board.)

Crossword | No. 293425



Last Sunday's Solution



- ACROSS**
- CO₂'s core parts recycled for lower emissions (7)
 - Queries wrong title (7)
 - Dieter's sure about a drop of valium in coffee (4)
 - Telly broadcast featuring old queen losing energy in persuasive speech (10)
 - Losing First halves on return, Sweden and Norway displayed fatigue (6)
 - Scuppered the endless conflict before the sultry deserted (8)
 - Attacks deputy receiving a text (9)
 - See Posh's partner in audience, a bearded beast (7)
 - Many countries like backing Artificial Intelligence (4)
 - Perhaps stoner goggles kick it when high (9)
 - Plucking instrument, sentimental Zeus lost glimpses of Ulysses crossing river (8)
 - Bad tune not being played on the radio (3,3)
 - Softening murmur returned in a chant (10)
 - 29 Still independent, being of elusive nature (4)
 - 30 Barred from gym, stripped after naked run (7)
 - 31 Pot for sale (not suitable for children) beside prison (4,3)
- DOWN**
- Country's air has rising carbon monoxide, with articles describing dead (1,6)
 - Power making BP a potential victim of spill (5)
 - Sweetheart holds up item that helps their game (5)
 - Harsh call from Conservative about going for week on vacation (4)
 - Arsenal player cycling to collect French wine - that's worrying (7)
 - 6 Soothe Republican First Lady hosting priest from Israel (7)
 - 9 End of interminably boring pot (10,3)
 - 13 Occasionally, diary close to Pepsy illustrates parts of world (5,5)
 - 16 Working adult up item that helps normally (5)
 - 18 Singer replacing tenor with soprano too (4)
 - 20 Picked out clean, cutting-edge product (7)
 - 22 One man's best friend shattered his headlight's edge on no-frills Suzuki (4,3)
 - 23 Institutional facility embarrassed and distressed kin (10)
 - 26 Knowing times for space mission (6)
 - 28 Seconds from lighting bonfire, logs become pulp (5)
- NOTE: Figures in parentheses denote the number of letters in the words required. (By arrangement with The Independent, London)



The Hitavada

They are slaves who dare not be
in the right with two or three

Lowell

Nakshatra Vishakha 24H 07M
Moon Tula upto (Rajandekar Panchang)
Chaitra Krishna Paksha Tithi Tritiya 11H 59M
Muslim Shawwal 16th Hijree 1447

DISASTROUS PATH

IT is a major overhaul of the United States military leadership or a vengeful decision by a furious Head of the State? The Americans are figuring out the rationale behind high-profile sacking of uniformed officers in the middle of a raging war after Defence Secretary Mr. Pete Hegseth ousted US Army Chief of Staff Gen Randy George, Gen David Hodne and Major General William Green. No reason has been given for the decision to remove the decorated officers when the country is engaged in an intense war with Iran. The sackings have come on the heels of the removal of Attorney General Ms. Pam Bondi, once a loyalist of President Mr. Donald Trump. The three major decisions have shaken the US politics and military circles even as a spiteful regime continues to push the country towards an impending disaster on all fronts.

The ouster of Gen Randy George is being termed as part of a broader overhaul of US military leadership since President Mr. Trump returned to the White House. The officer's removal is in line with many changes effected by Mr. Trump in the last few months, it is said. However, this decision cannot be seen through the simple prism of an overhaul, for, Gen George is known as an astute leader with tons of experience. His sackings smack of a definite vendetta by the administration which is increasingly facing reverses at all levels over the continuation of the Iran war without any strategy or exit plan.

The three officers who were shown the door by the Defence Secretary possess a great career record. They led forces in many conflict zones where American boots were put by the political leadership. Their experience must have shaped the US strategy in the ongoing war but with the daily flip-flop of the President and no exit strategy, the generals must have conveyed to Mr. Hegseth that his Iran plans were turning unworkable, disastrous and deadly. The sacking came immediately after Mr. Trump threatened a ground invasion of Iran. This plan seems to have become the ultimate bone of contention between the civil and military leadership and hence the unceremonious ouster of the uniformed officers.

The sacking of the generals and the Attorney General reflects the anxieties of Mr. Trump in face of a major crisis. Already embroiled in the Epstein files, the POTUS has encountered severe setbacks in the Iran war. The American economy has started to bleed and the world is turning against the US in an apparent thumbs-down to Mr. Trump's high-handed functioning. Frustration is growing alarmingly for the President as seen in his daily U-turns on Iran. It is leading to removal of all sane voices who are questioning his decisions and their consequences. The case of Ms. Bondi is on the same lines. She had upended the US Justice Department's culture and helped the President in carrying out large-scale firings as the Epstein files started to become a political liability. In the end, Ms. Bondi was also unable to handle the pressure of the judiciary and had to relent in releasing some of the contents. It was seen as a betrayal by Mr. Trump and hence the dictatorial behaviour of the US administration.

Whatever is happening inside America has a striking similarity with the Chinese way of functioning. The all-powerful Chinese Communist Party (CCP) indulges in a similar purge of high-profile military and civic officials ahead of its annual conclave to send a strong message to the dissenters of President Mr. Xi Jinping. The US is walking the same path.

NEW NAVAL PROWESS

THE addition of indigenously-built stealth frigate INS Taragiri and Nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine INS Aridaman to the Indian Navy has increased vastly its overall effectiveness as one of the most important blue-water navies in the world. This development will also send a right message not just to the Asian neighbourhood but also to the larger world about India's naval presence in the oceanic domain.

Of course, these two vessels are only a part of the overall consolidation programme of the Indian Navy underway for the past few years. Many more such additions are slated to strengthen the Indian Navy in the next few years -- leaning heavily on indigenous critical components as part of the *Atmanirbhar Bharat* initiative of Prime Minister Mr. Narendra Modi's Government. Both these vessels -- INS Taragiri and INS Aridaman -- are equipped with most modern equipment designed and built by Indian engineers.

INS Taragiri is a 6,670-tonne warship built by Mazagon Dock Shipbuilders Ltd, Mumbai, and is equipped with the BrahMos Missiles whose capacity to inflict heavy damage to the targets stands proven. INS Taragiri is a sleeker structure with a much reduced radar cross-section enabling vastly improved stealth operations and capacity to survive attacks and stress.

INS Aridaman is the third N-powered submarine following INS Arihant and INS Arighat into the Indian Navy's sizeable fleet of underwater vessels. India's nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine programme, thus, has made a significant positive difference in enhancing the Navy's overall effectiveness.

India already has two advanced aircraft carriers and a third may be built in the next few years. By the time the third aircraft carrier comes along, one of the first two may become rather old -- thus necessitating a continued programme of building of aircraft carriers. It is good that the Indian Navy and the Government have committed themselves to the continued upgradation of the Navy as a perennial project.

BADLY PLANNED ABRUPT WAR

A sudden American retreat would leave the entire world drawing the consequences. Leaving the war at this point would give all the advantages to Iran. The Strait of Hormuz will remain closed, and at any rate under Iran's control, which was earlier an open international sea way.

BY ANJAN ROY

DONALD Trump, US President, is calling it quits. Badly bruised, Trump is claiming to have achieved his aim of a regime change in Iran. He is also claiming that Iran is insisting on an end to the war.

Having created a mess, Trump is seeing no bright path for an honourable exit. Hence, he is making tall claims of having achieved all goals, however distant they look in plain sight. Trump has put forward the argument that USA never needed the Strait of Hormuz route for securing its oil.

So, it is others who should now pick up elated courage and force opening the Strait of Hormuz. Everyone sees through that and Moscow has mocked Trump, saying that his military has failed to open up the vital sea lane, Hormuz Strait.

But a sudden American retreat would leave the entire world drawing the consequences. Leaving the war at this point would give all the advantages to Iran. The Strait of Hormuz will remain closed, and at any rate under Iran's control, which was earlier an open international sea way.

Iran might even continue with its toll on passing ships, with that has started doing now. That will be permanent loss. An open international sea lane cannot be operated as a toll road by the littoral country.

The supply of oil and gas would

continue to be limited as the oil and gas facilities have been badly hit by the missiles strikes. It will take a long time to repair the facilities and restore their production capacities. That might also mean the investments required for putting these back into order would raise prices for good.

This is the end result of a badly planned abrupt war, launched by a megalomaniac President who had thought he was all-powerful after an asquish attack on a neighbouring country. Trump had mistakenly assumed Venezuela to be a model for the rest of the world.

On its part, Iran is equally vociferous that it will not cease fire and would continue to fight. Iran is also saying that its leaders are safe and sound and are very much in the saddle. As if to show its defiance, Iran started battering some of the West Asian countries, as well as, Israel the moment Trump finished his gaudy ramblings in the security of White House Oval Office.

If anything, it would be the worst outcome to leaving Iran with its games as it is at present. The whole of West Asia, that is, from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, UAE, Bahrain and all the others would be at the mercy of Iran. They have been terrorised in course of the war, and an emboldened Iran would further bamboozle them.

The only side not claiming victory or end of war is Israel which had kept pounding Iranian cap-

ital Tehran and mounted its offensive against the Hezbollah in Lebanon. US suddenly washing its hands of the entire affair, would leave Israel vulnerable.

Israel's reputation of being invincible has been badly shattered. It has not scored any clear victory on either Iran or over the Hezbollah outfit. If anything, the latter would be more extravagant in its attitude.

Therefore, the conflicting narratives of the war take the world no further than where matters stood. If anything, it would be far worse.

This is a total logjam and dislocation of the global economy. Oil prices were rising still and countries across the world are adopting measures to control oil and gas supplies as well as their prices. The economic fall-out would be all the more severe on the less developed and poorer countries. African countries are complaining of the impact already.

But the worst damage has been to the United States. Its image as a responsible power has been dented. The whimsical ways the USA has behaved calls for a regime change there than any where else. What a shameful retreat for the acclaimed "most powerful military in the world".

The severe blows that the Americans have sustained in the on-going war could not be understated. Only this week, two of America's high prized surveillance aircraft, F3 entry aircraft called AWACS have been

destroyed beyond repair. It is not that such aircraft were plenty and can be easily replaced. On Friday, a USA-10 aircraft has also been hit by Iranian air defences. According to a US official it was a second US Air Force combat aircraft went down in the Middle East on Friday as a US fighter jet was shot down in Iran and one crew member was rescued earlier in the day.

It was the first time US aircraft have been downed in the conflict and came just two days after President Donald Trump said in a national address that the US has "beaten and completely defeated" Iran and was "going to finish the job, and we're going to finish it very fast."

American bases in West Asia have been battered beyond recognition. The question will arise if these would be rebuilt or the Americans might be asked to wind up. After all, these bases have not provided any defence cover to the countries which had harboured them. On the contrary, these bases have attracted attention and bombardment.

Given the downsides of a sudden withdrawal, it sometimes look like if Trump was using this as a ruse to bring laxity among the Iranians. He of course promises to return in future if need be.

But everything around Trump is absurd drama. Nobody could be sure what he means. To ordinary people, it is a world verging on the lunatic.

(IPA)

Moral erosion of young minds

"AREY sir! Ab aap rules batane mat baith jana." I'm sure many of us remember that KBC episode till date. Sparking strong criticism on social media, people criticised the child and, more so, his parents for such arrogant behaviour. Something similar happened once with my English teacher who accidentally collided with a student of grade seven. The student's behaviour turned out to be completely unexpected as, instead of apologising, he looked at her in the eye and dashed straight away without saying anything. Such incidents have now-a-days, become a common phenomenon in our society. One can easily witness students of grade 5-8 openly talking using abusive language during recess. What do all such incidents indicate? Moral deterioration seems to be evident among our new generation.

We may say that this generation is equipped with a tech-savvy attitude that can be best used to develop analytical and objective thinking. Suppose a car has all the fuel to drive a long distance but lacks a skilled driver who can navigate the right roads and prevent the car from falling into ravines. What will happen? Ultimately, the car is going to collide or fall and get destroyed. Similar is the case with our generation. Our new generation lacks these very ethics, which tell a person what is good or bad for them. This lack of ethics propels them into acting in ways that are often morally unjustified.

Then we tend to ask, "Were children like this earlier?" This change has actually started from an over-entitled and ignorant behaviour of parents. The older generation was obedient, humble and ethical as their parents never shied away from offering punishments for unjust acts or behaviour and monitored their children's actions and behaviour time to time. Hence all this used to be more of an obligation rather than a choice for them.

Once I asked my father, "Why did you never commit nuisances outside?" My father quickly responded, "We were too terrified to let any complaints reach our father's ears." This fear, in a

limited amount, kept children in their limits, preventing them from getting spoiled later in future. Parents also narrated bedtime stories to children, often abridged from their own religious texts, which set good examples and values for the children to follow.

Parents, the first teachers of their child, rarely bash their adorables, keep a watch of their social behaviour, or spend time inculcating moral values into them either through stories or through discussions. They do not waste positive attitude or behaviour in their children, but often do not put any efforts into the process. Often, parents after having returned from their workplace, are found engaged in mobile phones, instead of playing or talking with their children, who are busy watching TV alone. More so, when parents just keep scolding their children for wrong doings without explaining them through reasons behind their disapproval, the children tend to view their parents as dictators and their advice as worthless of acting on or even listening to. Hence, they continue to believe that their actions are justified and keep going on the wrong path.

The solution to this problem requires fostering a strong bond of interaction between the parents and the children so that the children trust their parents as much as they trust both their 'offline' and 'online' friends. This can be done by allowing children to express their opinions freely and then correcting them with strong facts and arguments that can counter their wrong opinions and clean their brains. Parents can also provide them with substitutes that keep them connected with reality while building up their personality and knowledge, such as magazines over mobile phones and sports academy classes over online game sessions.

A man's nature runs either to weeds or to herbs, therefore let him reasonably water the one and destroy the other. All these ways would definitely turn their attention towards grasping positive and useful things, preventing them from slipping towards unjust talks, thoughts or actions they often see and hear among their friends or on social media.

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Inspiration

THERE are many ways to live life but a few of them lead to beautiful life while rest male life difficult. Here are a few for living beautiful life: TAKE a 10-30 minute walk every day and while you walk, smile. This simple, mindful practice often cited as a 'beautiful life' tip improves mood, builds stamina, and increases overall energy.

Sit in silence for at least 10 minutes each day. Live with the 3 E's... Energy, Enthusiasm, Empathy. Spend more time with people over the age of 70 and under the age of 6. Dream more while you are awake.

Try to make at least three people smile each day. Realise that life is a school and you are here to learn, pass all your tests. Problems are simply part of the curriculum that appear and fade away like algebra class but the lessons you learn will last a lifetime.

Smile and laugh more. It will keep the energy vapours away. Life isn't fair, but it's still good. Life is too short to waste time hating anyone. Don't take yourself so seriously. No one else does.

You don't have to win every argument. Agree to disagreements. Make peace with your past, so it won't mess up the present.

Don't compare your life with others'. You have no idea what their journeys are all about. -- Burn the candles, use the nice shades. Don't save it for a special occasion. Today is special.

No one is in charge of your happiness except you. Forgive everyone for everything. -- What other people think of you is none of your business. Time heals almost everything. Give time, time.

Your job won't take care of you when you are sick. Your friends will stay to give you a healing touch.

Every Man in his Humour Letters to the Editor

Kejriwal's failure

Sir, This refers to the news report regarding Raghav Chadha's removal from the deputy leader of Rajya Sabha by the AAP and its aftermath. Sources suggest Chadha's silence on key party issues and absence from events led to the decision.

It is prerogative for the party to take disciplinary action against its own party member. However, restraining its member from speaking in Rajya Sabha shows a lack of internal democracy in the party. The AAP supremo Mr Kejriwal has failed on this front. Part of handling Chadha has shown the party in a poor light. S.Sankaranarayanan, Chennai

Boost to defence export

Sir, As per a recent data from the Ministry of Defence, India's defence exports hit an all time high of Rs. 38,424 crore for the fiscal year 2025-26 which represents a whopping increase of 62.66% increase from the previous year.

For decades India was known as one of the world's largest importers of defence equipment but slowly and gradually India has marked a decisive structural shift. This enormous jump in defence exports reflected the rising global trust in India's indigenous defence capabilities and India is scripting history. With the success of

Operation Sindoor, India has continuously improved its capability and focussed on advanced weapons. At present Brahmos supersonic missile is in high demand as Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia, and U.A. E. have evinced incredible interest for it.

The contribution of Defence PSU is 54.84 per cent and private industry is 45.16 per cent and this transfiguration displays the power of a combined and self-sufficient environment. This achievement of the Indian defence industry will surely position India as a robust and resilient nation. Email: Rajesh B. Khandelwal

Myanmar's future

Sir, The recent development in Myanmar has been seeking the global eyeball as the nation has invited military leader Min Aung Hlaing as the new President of Myanmar. It has been five years that Min Aung has been ruling the nation under his military capabilities, closing every room for democracy to bloom again. It is unfortunate to note that the military chief became President without initiating any formal channel of democratic means of power establishment. Only time will tell the truth about political developments taking shape for Myanmar in the days to come. Kirti Wadhawan, Kanpur



Role of propaganda in war: Case study of Iran

Before the advent of artificial intelligence (AI), information war, which included this information and deception, was done through the medium of print and electronic media like newspapers, radio or television to confuse adversaries.

Allen Dulles, father of modern American intelligence, describes this process in chapter 11 of his seminal work "The Craft of Intelligence" (1963): "Confusing the Adversary."

Dulles prescribes step-by-step preparations for successful deception operations: First the originating country should assess how the adversarial country thinks and what it expects. This is best done by misleading information, if sent across, must be plausible in the existing situation there. During the war, it would change minute to minute. The second step is devising the process

of infusing that false information into the target country.

He quotes a very successful deception operation known as "Operation Mincematt" in 1943 during the Second World War. After the Axis army was defeated in North Africa, the Allied forces wanted to make the Axis believe that Germany and Japan) on the exact area where they would land in Southern Europe. While the Allies wanted to land in Sicily, which they did on 10 July 1943, it was necessary to mislead the Axis army to believe that it was somewhere else.

Early in May 1943, the body of a Royal Marine Major in full uniform was found on the Spanish coast in public view, presumably after an air crash. Strapped on the body's wrist was a military courier bag containing a top-secret letter from Sir (General) Archibald Nye



Vappala Balachandran

'America was blindly following Israel's script to make Iran another Gaza'

Wall Street Journal said on April 2 that US treasury yield could decline to around 4.20% from the current 4.30% if the war does not end.



of British Imperial General Staff to General Harold Alexander, then leading the 15th Army Group in Africa, hinting an Allied plan to invade Southern Europe via Sardinia and Greece.

For this operation, the British intelligence had to obtain a body, which was dressed up in a British Major's uniform with all identification papers as "Major Martin". It was then airlifted to Southern Spain and floated in sea by using a submarine near a town in Southern Spain.

Hitler came to know this through his spies. He promptly diverted an

armoured division to Greece. This adversely affected the Axis garrison in Sicily when the invasion came in July. Full details of this very complicated operation are in Ewen Montagu's "The man who never was" (1953). Sir Archibald Nye later served as the British High Commissioner in India (1948-52).

Coming to the present US-Israeli war on Iran,

accounts on X, Bluesky, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and other platforms through generative AI tools "to create increasingly realistic looking images and videos". Since the Internet is mostly banned in Iran, the target audience is the outside world.

The paper also said many of these accounts, controlled by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), are by humans and not by automated bots for spreading messages to the Spanish speaking users in Texas, California, Venezuela and English-speaking people. The paper quoted Darren Linnell, director of Clemson University's Media Forensics Hub (South Carolina): "They're winning the propaganda war."

The New York Times also added that the credi-

bility of the propaganda had been enhanced by quoting viral posts by anti-Trump and anti-Israel "influencers". As a result, this "information war" has given Iran's leadership a "weapon almost as potent as its ability to disrupt the world's energy economy".

Col (ret'd) Douglas Abbott Macgregor, a former Trump follower, said America was blindly following Israel's script to make Iran another Gaza and in that process drive America into deep recession. Wall Street Journal said on April 2 that US treasury yield could decline to around 4.20% from the current 4.30% if the war does not end.

The author is former special secretary, Cabinet Secretariat. Views expressed are personal.

Trump should go: Voices from US

The American President Donald John Trump is the leader of the most powerful economy and military of the world. The common refrain has been that, "Britain is the oldest democracy, India the biggest and the USA is the greatest". As the 45th President of the United States (2017-2021), Trump was acceptable and, to some, adorable. At the end of his term, Trump, having lost the re-election, nudged his supporters to storm the White House, which raised the eyebrows of many on his democratic spirit and inclinations. In the second term, as he assumed office as the 47th President in January 2025, Trump became a different person, unrecognisable compared to his first term, and intolerable for many.

To confess, until today, I have been a sympathetic supporter of Trump. My perspective was premised on the understanding that Trump may not be articulate in public, not media-savvy, often putting his foot in his mouth, but his actions were directed towards creating prosperity (making money) and building peace in the world. He himself claims that he was instrumental in ending seven wars in his second term. He made a promise to end the Ukraine war soon after he assumed his second term and he unsuccessfully tried. Ironically, he plunged his country into a war against Iran without concretely planning its conclusion.

Trump claimed to fin-

ish the Iran war in a few weeks but is still dragging on. In his latest 19-minute address to the nation, he has again claimed to end it soon even without a deal with Iran. But he has also used undiplomatic and harsh words about Iranians. He said, "We will hit them hard and push it back to the stone-age."

This is incomprehensible from the President of the United States because, according to him, one of the war objectives was to secure regime change. It is not a war against Iran, it is a war against Donald Trump's personality and politics.

The uncomprehensible Donald Trump to be impetuous and capricious but his abusive language is not acceptable. Once he said that Russia and China are two dead economies. His Vice President went to a European security conference and called names of European leaders and riled their leadership style. Trump's utterances about NATO leaders have left the world's most powerful military alliance on the brink. Now, Trump and his foreign secretary Marco Rubio are talking about their continuation in NATO. That is an unfortunate development for NATO.

The context of rethinking American's NATO membership is the refusal of NATO members to militarily support Trump in the Iran war. Trump did not think he would need



Prof D K Giri



additional support to subdue Iran. He thought Israel and the US could finish the job sooner than later. As Trump increasingly got stuck in the conflict, and in his desperation to free-up the Strait of Hormuz, he asked NATO allies to give a hand. Exasperation over Trump's remarks on European leadership, double talk on Ukrainian war and untenable demand to acquire Greenland have alienated the NATO allies who are quickly building up their own defence capability rather than depending on the US any longer.

Trump is facing heavy criticism at home and non-cooperation from abroad. First, the domestic opposition: Criticism against Trump is building up on several fronts. The "No Kings" movement, a coalition of progressive and anti-authoritarian organisations, has been protesting against Trump's expansion of executive powers, immigration policies and military actions in Iran. The movement has organised several nationwide protests with thousands marching in Washington DC, New York, Los Angeles and other cities. It is estimated that about 8 million people have taken to the streets across the country to protest Trump's policies. The specific areas of criticism

include authoritarianism: Trump's actions are seen as authoritarian while critics accuse him of undermining democracy and the rule of law. Trump's economic policies are being criticised for favouring the wealthy and exacerbating income inequality. His hardline immigration policies have been widely criticised, with many arguing they are inhuman and target specific communities. America is a land of immigrants. Its wealth and might were created by hard working immigrants who migrate to the United States for greater opportunity. Trump himself has immigrant parentage.

Trump's foreign policy decisions, including his handling of the Iran situation, have raised concerns about his impulsiveness and potential for escalation. In fact, some Republicans are critical of Trump's leadership style and policies arguing that they are alienating voters and harming the party's prospects in the 2026 midterms. Trump's approval ratings have fallen with a recent poll showing 38 per cent support, the lowest this year. There have been sporadic attempts to impeach President Trump.

Internationally, Trump is losing support. Many leaders would like to be aligned with the United States but not Trump and they are waiting out his second term. -JNFA

The author is a Prof of Practice, NIS Group of Institutions. Views expressed are personal.

Recognising a good man!



Robert Clements

Good Friday has passed and it is Easter tomorrow. My mind wanders to that hill outside Jerusalem where three crosses stood like a grim exhibition of human judgement. On the middle cross hung Jesus, declared innocent by the very authority that sentenced him. On either side were two thieves, properly labelled, properly condemned, properly placed.

And yet, in that strange courtroom wood and nails, something remarkable happened.

One thief behaved exactly as expected. He mocked. He sneered. He joined the crowd below. It is always comforting to follow the majority, even when one is nailed to a bad decision.

But the other thief did something quite inconvenient. He thought.

Now thinking, as we all know, is a dangerous activity. It can separate you from the crowd.

This thief looked at the man beside him and came to a realisation that the educated, the powerful and the religious had all missed. He recognised a good man.

Imagine the setting. Pain shooting through his body. Breath coming in short bursts. Life slipping away with every second. If ever there was a time to mind one's own business, this was it. But no, this man chose that exact moment to speak up. Not about himself, but about another.

While the crowd shouted, "Crucify!" he quietly said, "This man has done nothing wrong."

There is courage, and then there is this.

We, on the other hand, are far more practical. We wait for official statements. We check social media. We see which way the wind is blowing. If an institution points a finger, we nod wisely. If a government labels someone, we adjust our moral compass accordingly. After all, who wants to be on the wrong side of authority, especially when authority comes with microphones and press releases?

We have perfected the art of safe silence.

The tragedy is not that innocent people are punished. That has been happening for centuries. The real tragedy is that those who recognise innocence often choose convenience over courage.

That thief had nothing to gain. No future to secure. No reputation to protect.

He turned to Jesus and made a simple request, a desperate one, a sincere one. And the response he received was astonishing. "Today you shall be with me in paradise."

No committee meeting. No background verification. Just a recognition of truth, rewarded instantly.

So here is the uncomfortable question this Good Friday.

When the world points and mocks, when the crowd gathers stones or words, when authority declares someone guilty, do we have the courage to pause, to think, and if needed, to stand up and say, "This man has done nothing wrong?"

Or will we, like the first thief, simply join the noise?

Because sometimes, recognising a good man is the bravest thing we can ever do. -

Truth: Force that transforms lives

Most of us have a deep quest to know the truth that is complete and unmixtd. This search for truth is perhaps the most defining characteristic of human consciousness. It is this inner urge that has pushed humanity from caves to civilisations, from superstition to science and from blind belief to rational inquiry. Yet, ironically, the same human mind that seeks truth also fears the discomfort that truth sometimes brings. However, it has been learnt from experience that, in general, when a man is told the truth which does not square well with his present belief, he does not accept it, or at least, he puts up a strong

resistance towards it. This resistance is not always because the new idea is wrong, but often because accepting it demands the courage to question one's own mental comfort zone.

It is a paradox of the fact that man has so much attachment to his existing beliefs that not only does he offer resistance to new ideas and knowledge but he also becomes even intolerant to the new thoughts so much so that he commits violence and indulges into destructive acts. From the persecution of thinkers and reformers to the silencing of dissenting voices, the pattern has repeated itself across cultures and centuries. This prejudice towards new thought or

SPIRITUAL INSIGHT



Rajyogi Brahmakumar Nikunjji

The future will belong not to those who resist change, but to those who develop the wisdom to examine, absorb and apply truth with an open yet discerning mind.

New knowledge is built not merely by people's ignorance or attachment to old beliefs but also by established schools or institutions of learning. They have been resisting any such thing reaching the hands of the masses that contradicts what is stated in the course books or the authorised versions.

Very often, systems meant to liberate the mind gradually become systems that condition the mind, unless they consciously renew themselves. This continues even till today



though to a lesser degree. Because the educated people nowadays are more open to new ideas and the educational institutions also now encourage research on many topics which were untouched till date. The digital age too has played a silent but powerful role by democratising access to information, making it harder than ever to permanently suppress or distort the truths. There is thus some change in the environment as compared to what it was about a hundred or fifty

years ago. But the in-built prejudice towards new thought and resistance to new beliefs has not yet completely vanished. It now appears in subtler forms such as social exclusion, intellectual dismissal, organised trolling rather than open persecution. Such reactions only demonstrate insecurity of belief rather than strength of conviction.

It should be remembered that false knowledge or ignorance builds up deep prejudice, hatred and emotional attachment which lead people to violent reactions. Hence, in order to remove prejudice and hatred, its base which is false knowledge will have to be removed. And, for that, truth will have to be told. But truth also needs the right language, the right timing and the right approach, because harsh presentation of truth sometimes closes the very minds it intends to

open. So, we should try to devise methods which can stop false knowledge from putting up violent reactions rather than putting up pressure so that the truth is not given expression. Patient dialogue, compassionate communication and gradual exposure to better knowledge have historically proven to be more effective than confrontation. We must understand the fact that those people who show resistance to or opposition against new ideas or knowledge are very small in numbers and hence we must bear in mind that this has always been the case with preachers of new ideas and that initially only a small number of people would accept new knowledge. However, as time goes by more and more people start accepting the truth.

Remember, the truth of the knowledge should not be judged by the small

number of people who accept it but by the change it brings about in the life of those who accept it. Truth proves itself not by popularity but by its power to elevate human thinking and conduct. Hence, we must now rise up from deep slumber and give up our resistance and opposition and should learn a lesson from history and start recognising and accepting the wisdom and knowledge which would help in bringing about a great transformation world-wide. The future will belong not to those who resist change, but to those who develop the wisdom to examine, absorb and apply truth with an open yet discerning mind.

The author is a spiritual educator & popular columnist for publications across India, Nepal & UK. Views expressed are personal.



Mapping the hidden ecological cost of conflicts

VARIETY PAGE 2



KK Venugopa's memoir is a document of personal as well as national history

BOOKS PAGE 4

CHANDIGARH | 5 APRIL 2026

NONIKA SINGH

AS 'Dhurandhar: The Revenge' continues its historic run just months after the stupendous success of 'Dhurandhar', it is clear that while the visuals provide the impact, the soundtrack is the literal heartbeat of the franchise. Director Aditya Dhar may have built the world, but music director Shashwat Sachdev and an eclectic mix of voices have given it a soul India can't stop humming.

The film's cinematic merits remain a point of contention between critics and fans, but the soundtrack is an unmistakable triumph. Touted in album launch promos as a "Shashwat Sachdev musical", he has crafted a landscape where traditional roots collide with modern sensibilities, turning the album into a masterclass of atmospheric storytelling.

Singers like Reble and Khan Saab are no longer just niche favourites; they are becoming household names, their voices synonymous with the film's high-stakes energy. Danish-Indian singer Navtej Singh Rehal of *Bombay Rockers* has rediscovered massive fame. The reimagining of *Aari Aari* has ignited a cross-generational spark that is dominating airwaves.

Perhaps the most fascinating phenomenon is the "Sartaaj Effect". The legendary Satinder Sartaaj has achieved nationwide viral status by lending his voice to just two soulful lines: "Saru sarigan visar gairan nuahvan re..." It is a testament to the Punjabi singer's stature that this brief, haunting couplet remains one of the most shared and searched moments of the entire album.

Matching this intensity is Jasmine Sandlas — born in Punjab and raised in California. Her contribution to both the films is undeniable, but it is her electric, viral screen presence in *Sharaarat* and the tracks 'Main Aur Tu' as well as *Jaiye Sajna* that have created a secondary storm. Sandlas' voice embodies the defiant, restless spirit of the film itself.

The Indian film industry has always stood out for its one distinctive feature — the song-and-dance routine. Be it earlier directors like Raj Kapoor and Guru Dutt or modern-day filmmakers like Sanjay Leela Bhansali and Vishal Bhardwaj, all have used music as an important story-telling tool. Mohit Suri's attention to music has been so phenomenal that even when his movies did not work, the lilting melodies never failed to touch a chord.

With 'Dhurandhar', Dhar elevates music to not just a story enabler, but the narrator itself. His musicality apparently stems from his roots. Son of Sunita Dhar, who served as the Dean and head of the Faculty of Music and Fine Arts, Delhi University, he grew up amidst classical sounds. Besides, Dhar's faith in Shashwat goes back to 2016 while making *Raat Baaki*. It was initially shelved but released as *Dhoom Dhaam* last year, though Shashwat did not give the music.

Born in Jaipur, Shashwat's Hindustani classical training began at three. Western classical beckoned while pursuing law at Pune. In Los Angeles, he got an opportunity to work with two-time Oscar winner Hans Zimmer for a crime-thriller series, becoming the first Indian to do so. And if you think Shashwat and Diljit Dosanjh got 'Ee-Ee' in the 'Dhurandhar' verse, their comfort zone dates back to Dosanjh-starrer *Phillauri*, the first film for which Shashwat composed.

Lately, his chartbuster *Gafoor* became a high-octane anthem for Aryan Khan's "Bachchan" of Bollywood.

For Shashwat, who won the National Award for Dhar's *Uri: The Surgical Strike*, music is all about interpreting the text. Any wonder, walking in step with *Dhurandhar's* lead character, Ranveer Singh's Hamza/Jaskirat, rooted in Punjab *di mitti*, he leans on Punjabi pop influences and yet creates his own musical architecture.

Beyond the unusual medley of sounds, music in both parts of the blockbuster is a recurring leitmotif, an underlying subtext as also an overarching character. If one moment it reflects the poignant journey of Hamza, at another it turns audacious and rises to capture the breathtaking action in its thunderous beats. Tension, conflict,



ON SONG



Extreme left: Aditya Dhar's musicality comes from his roots. Mother Sunita Dhar was head of the faculty of Music and Fine Arts, DU; (and left) Shashwat Sachdev's music is a power-packed story, a mix of genres from Arabic pop to qawwalis to old Hindi songs.

pain, trauma are all writ in its uplifting poetry and exhilarating rhythms.

In a country where songs have often been the loo-break moment, Shashwat's music is a power-packed story in itself — experimental yet organic, a confluence of varied cultural influences from Arabic pop track produced by DJ Outlaw and performed by Bahraini rapper Flipperachi, to Pakistani qawwalis to India's yesteryear chartbusters. And then, who would have thought of amalgamating voices from Punjab with those from the Northeast. Yet, it's a musical score which is always in sync with the film but has a life of its own — engrossing, electrifying and entertaining all at once. As a Gen-Z music buff says, "Movies are often larger than life, but here music, too, has an unmatched Titanic scale echoing its characters' robust personas."

Time and again, Intiaz Ali and his favourite lyricist Irshad Kamil's musical

alchemy has given memorable numbers, for instance in 'Amar Singh Chamkila', with its impactful 'Mainu Vida Karo'. Kamil's lyrical verses have often been woven in the larger fabric of the film. What the gifted lyricist from Malerkotla has written for both parts of 'Dhurandhar' is imbued not just with meaning and purpose, but a deep reflection of the narrative arc. So much so that listeners can find newer allusions in what seemed like just another love song. When the first part was released in December last year, 'Gehru Hua' found its way as a favourite ringtone.

Today, discerning cinephiles can sense a deeper meaning in its poetic metre, not just the spy reference in the line: "Tujh se baak be chalna bid hai". In the use of the words "dhruva khwah", they can sense what 'The Revenge' has shown: the love story of Hamza and Elina is not exactly a happily ever after.

Noted casting director Mukesh Chhabra, whose on-point casting for Aditya Dhar's vast array of adorable and despicable characters has won him fulsome praise, says he himself listens to the songs on a loop. He recalls, "During the casting process itself, Dhar would tell me repeatedly as to how he is going to use the music in his films; in short, like never before in Hindi cinema."

Music composers often collaborate with the captain of the ship to grasp the finer details and create the necessary mood. Shashwat's musical genius is evident not only in how he has experimented with a whole range of voices with varying tones and textures, but in the use of remakes — from the repressed version of 'Na Toh Karavan Ki Talaash Hai', to 'Aari Aari' and 'Tamma Tamma'. What's equally remarkable is how the song is used in a pivotal scene concerning Sanjay Dutt's SP

Askam. The irony, that the original was pictured on the 'Khalnayak' star and Madhuri Dhot in 'Thaanedaar', is not lost on those who follow cinema avidly. An Easter egg by way of a song.

Clearly, remakes have been the order of the film industry for quite some time. As Mukesh puts it, "Remixes can often be specific to a situation. Only Shashwat has used them because these were popular numbers of their times and fit aptly in the narrative. What's more, look at how he has blended them with English lyrics."

If in the voice of Reble, a singer from Meghalaya in her early 20s, songs like 'Naal Nachna', 'Monica, Oh My Darling' and 'Main Aur Tu' acquire the requisite Gen-Z feel and timbre, the use of 'Raspurin' simply takes your breath away. To reimagine Boney M's song in a climactic moment, drawing a parallel between the entrapment of a Pakistani General with a historical Russian figure requires some imagination. And gumption, too, which anyway is a hallmark of Dhar's films.

According to Mukesh, the beauty of Dhar's directorial skills and Shashwat's musical prowess is their combined ability to spring a surprise. He avers, "Just look at the placement of songs. These are largely as an antithesis to what one would expect in that particular sequence." If he loves how 'Tamma Tamma' and 'Hum Pyar Karne Wale' have been juxtaposed during crucial turning points, he swears by Dhar's vision, "Crystal clear from the word go."

He adds, "From the look of each character to the design of a scene to the musical motif, he had it all ready in his mind. And, of course, Shashwat is an exceptionally creative musician who matched his director's exemplary vision note by note." The

net result — every character, major or minor, gets a fillip with every song that has them in the frame.

Call it the power of conviction or the synergy of two genre-bending geniuses, today the music of 'Dhurandhar' not only rules popularity charts, but is the go-to score for random reels. Music certainly has a soul of its own, but for film music to become the movie's signature, manifesting itself in more than one theme, is a rare feat.

As a rule, remakes take you back to the original verse, but with 'Dhurandhar', pick any remix and you will only be reminded of the world Dhar has created.

Originals like 'Phir Se Naina Bhaer', in the unmatched voice of Arijit Singh, with lyrics by Kamil, convey the emotional weight of Hamza's heartbreaking dilemma of a man unable to return home, as no dialogue ever could have. In a way, it's also a fitting answer to the brigade which is questioning with scepticism: can Hamza's revenge put an end to terror? The answer lies in the lyrics: 'Sanjhe they hum, gham hai khatam'... pain might be cyclical but music as a balm, as an immersive experience, requires unerring felicity and nerve.

Instead of ticking the checklist, Dhar and Shashwat decided to create their own, and now it's the playlist of millions.

If 'Dhurandhar' became the first Hindi film album to have its entire soundtrack chart simultaneously on Spotify's Global Top 200, 11 out of 14 tracks of 'The Revenge' found the same exalted place. As the sequel crosses the ₹1,500-crore mark globally, it's a classic case of one feeding the other. Music and the film have never been in a more symbiotic relationship. The director and his musical team have not just completed a story, but created history.



Jasmine Sandlas' (third from left in red) electric presence in 'Dhurandhar' tracks pushed it to become the first Hindi film album to have its entire soundtrack on Spotify's Global Top 200. PT1

Flight, interrupted

As conflicts intensify, migratory birds are being forced to alter routes, skip vital stopovers, and navigate increasingly hostile skies — threatening delicate ecological balances across continents



Flocks of common cranes move along ancient flyways, connecting distant landscapes. PHOTOS BY THE WRITER

PARTH JOSHI

WHEN a missile lights up the night sky over the Arabian Gulf or a drone swarm hums across the plains of Eastern Europe, the world keenly watches as airlines scramble for safe corridors. But aeroplanes are not the only objects whose paths are forcibly diverted by wars. A much older and more delicate aviation network is also thrown into crisis.

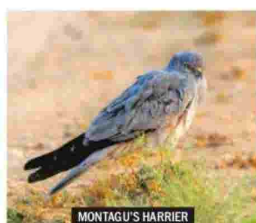
Each year in spring, billions of birds migrate North, where abundant daylight and food, combined with fewer predators, offer safe breeding grounds. As colder seasons arrive and these regions become uninhabitable, they return South to spend the winter. These flights are instinctive, refined by evolution over millennia.

Even first-time migrants travelling alone navigate expertly, guided by a genetic compass and environmental cues such as daylight, winds and the earth's magnetic field. Many return, year after year, to the same wintering grounds or breeding sites with pinpoint precision, one of the most extraordinary feats in the natural world.

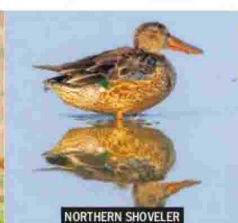
FLYWAYS UNDER PRESSURE

Bird migrations happen along aerial corridors known as "flyways", each used by a specific set of species. Along these flyways, birds often depend on a network of "stopover sites" — forests, grasslands or wetlands — where they rest and refuel before continuing journeys that are precisely attuned to seasonal changes.

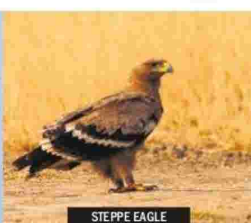
During conflicts, both flyways and stopover sites are subjected to intense human disturbance. Explosions, drones and aircraft generate sustained noise and light pollution, while military infrastructure degrades key habitats. When these pressures combine, birds may become disorient-



MONTAGU'S HARRIER



NORTHERN SHOVELER



STEPPE EAGLE

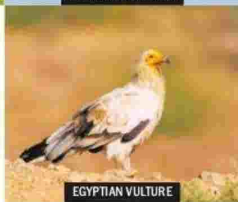
ed in flight and lose their way, skip critical stopover sites, or alter their migration routes. In some cases, even the invisible environment they rely on is affected. Electronic interference, such as GPS jamming or electromagnetic signals, can distort navigational cues, further complicating already demanding journeys.

A CHANGING MAP

Emerging research is trying to understand these changes. For instance, satellite tracking of the endangered Egyptian vulture has shown that routes passing through parts of Eastern Europe and the Black Sea region are now being used less frequently, with many birds taking a more Easterly path through Central Asia before entering South Asia. These shifts have been recorded since 2022, not directly correlated to, but coinciding with the onset of the Russia-Ukraine war. In parts of West Asia, conflicts have degraded or dried up wetlands, endangering waterbirds and waders such as ducks and cranes, which use them as stopovers or wintering sites. Even small disruptions at such stopover sites can adversely impact entire migration cycles.

CORRIDORS DISRUPTED

To understand the gravity of these detours



EGYPTIAN VULTURE

or skipped stopovers, one must view migration as a strict "energy budget". Every gram of fat stored is precious fuel meant for a fixed leg of the journey. When a war forces a bird to fly extra kilometres or bypass a resting site, it creates a "sublethal effect" — factors that may not immediately kill a bird but impair its long-term ability to function. These impacts are often not immediately noticeable, accumulating over time rather than causing instant mortality.

Birds that arrive at their breeding grounds exhausted can fail to reproduce, as they lack the strength to defend their territory or produce eggs. In slow-breeding species like eagles or vultures, a single bad year may be enough to trigger a population collapse that takes decades to recover.

The crisis ripples through the ecological cycles of the regions they visit. Migratory birds provide vital services like pest control, seed dispersal, and nutrient cycling. When warfare thins their numbers, communities that rely on these services also suffer, even if the root causes are geographically distant and largely unseen. India is home to three of the nine global flyways, the Central Asian Flyway being the most prominent. Disruptions in these corridors due to hostilities elsewhere directly affect the health of the avifauna arriving in the subcontinent. Raptors like vultures and eagles maintain ecosystem health by hunting pests and disposing of carcasses, limiting the spread of disease. If their migration is fractured, a rise in diseases may follow, or other scavengers like feral dogs may proliferate, distorting local ecology. Similarly, the presence of waterbirds and waders is tied to the health of Indian wetlands. These birds maintain ecological balance in habitats that support agriculture, groundwater recharge, and fisheries. If birds arrive late or in poor condition, these roles weaken, impacting the people that depend on them.

A MOVING CRISIS

Understanding these impacts, however, is increasingly difficult as the geopolitical

landscape evolves. Active war zones become "no-go" areas for field research, leaving scientists to rely on remote sensing techniques that may not capture the full extent of habitat degradation or subtle behavioural changes in migratory species.

Furthermore, the rising use of electronic warfare — specifically GPS jamming and signal spoofing — is hindering our primary monitoring tools. Satellite transmitters, used to track precise movements, now face "data blackouts" in military theatres, meaning the most significant shifts in avian behaviour are unfolding exactly where we are least able to observe them, creating critical gaps in scientific understanding.

RETHINKING CONSERVATION

As we look up at the sky to marvel at birds flying in V-formations, it is easy to view their arrival as a simple, timeless certainty. Yet those wings might be carrying the invisible baggage of a world at war.

Protecting them requires safeguarding critical habitats along flyways and strengthening cross-border conservation, particularly across regions where geopolitical tensions threaten to limit scientific cooperation. Addressing the environmental legacies of war must also become an integral part of post-conflict recovery efforts, ensuring that ecosystems are restored alongside communities, and that environmental monitoring is embedded into humanitarian response and reconstruction planning.

This also calls for greater investment in long-term research, improved international data-sharing, and the protection of stopover sites that serve as lifelines for migratory species. Because in protecting these journeys, we are not only conserving birds, but preserving the ecological connections that quietly sustain landscapes, livelihoods, and life itself across human borders.

— The writer is an environment activist and bird enthusiast

CAPTION CONTEST 1556



HIMANSHU MAHAJAN

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

SELECTED ENTRIES FOR CAPTION CONTEST 1556



SPECTRUM MARCH 29 ISSUE (SEE PHOTO)

- Paw-er nap — Alisha Chandra, Chandigarh
- Grounds for relaxation — Veda Chidananand via epaper, Bengaluru
- Hitting the sack — Praseon Gupta via epaper, Kumarhatti
- Concrete rest — Meenakshi Sharma via epaper, Amritsar
- Humanitarian ground — Harvinder Singh, Karnal

One of the most versatile foods, eggs offer a world of flavour, memory, and comfort in every bite

RAHUL VERMA

AS an avid egg lover, I have a soft corner for Easter. Not because I am religious — I am not — but because of a delicious imagery that is connected with the festival: decorated and gaily coloured hard-boiled eggs. On the day of the festival, I think we must celebrate the role that eggs play in our lives and recall all the many forms that they take. I like my double-fried eggs and omelette, and enjoy an occasional hard-boiled egg with salt and pepper. Egg curry — cooked in Kerala style, with a lot of onions, tamarind and pepper, or in a light gravy with boiled potatoes — is often our dinner. And there was a time when I couldn't have enough of an omelette curry: an omelette cut into squares and cooked in a thick sauce.

But these are the basic egg preparations. Almost every culture has its own signature egg dish, ranging from the simple to the exceptional. For the past few days, I have been gorging on *appam* and *mutta roast* at a humble *konir* I am a member of Assam's *konir dom* and Bengal's *dimer dalna* are simple variations of boiled eggs in a curry. Then there is the Parsi dish *akoori* — spicy scrambled eggs — which comes in all forms, with variations ranging from the addition of fried potatoes, ginger, *arhar dal* and spring onions to almonds, raisins and cashew nuts. There is even a hard-boiled egg *akoori*.

Eggs, as we all know, are a great

Sunny side up

SHAKSHUKA

INGREDIENTS

- Eggs 6
- Vegetable oil For cooking
- Onion (chopped) 1 large
- Green pepper (chopped) 1 large
- Tomatoes (chopped) 6
- Garlic cloves, minced 4
- Coriander powder 1 tsp
- Cumin powder ½ tsp
- Red chilli powder 1/4 tsp
- Pepper 1/4 tsp
- Coriander leaves 1 tsp
- Mint leaves 1 tsp
- Salt To taste
- Sweet paprika, if available 1 tsp

METHOD

Take 6 small bowls. Gently crack an egg into each one of them. Heat oil in a large flat-bottomed frying pan. Add the onions, garlic and green pepper. Add the spices and season with salt and pepper.

When the onions are soft, add the tomatoes, then sweet paprika, if available. Cook the tomatoes on low heat. When the tomatoes are cooked, make 6 dents, into each dent, slide in an egg from the bowls, one at a time. By putting the eggs in separate bowls, you ensure that if there is a rotten egg, you don't spoil all the ingredients by putting it directly into the pan. Cover.

When the egg whites are set, the dish is done. Garnish with mint, coriander leaves. Serve with crusty bread & extra virgin olive oil in a bowl on the side.

source of nutrients, rich in vitamins and minerals. There was a time when eggs were seen as a health risk, but increasingly they are being held up as an ideal and easy source of protein. According to a 2025 report in the journal *Nutrients*, new research says that relatively older adults who eat 1-6 eggs a week have a 29 per cent lower risk of cardiovascular disease-related death. Evidence that one egg a day is safe for most people is based on a body of studies, many

conducted at Harvard Medical School. Steel man Russi Modi knew that well before the studies became public. Legend has it that he used to consume a 16-egg omelette every day. I may not go that far, but I can never say no to a fluffy omelette, with a bit of ketchup on the side.

Among the other mouth-watering egg dishes is the *shakshuka*, a North African dish that is eaten across the region and in the Mediterranean, and is now quite a popular breakfast order in India. And the many cafes that have mushroomed in the metros serve a Turkish dish called *çibir* — poached eggs served on a bed of garlic and dill-flavoured Greek yoghurt. And how can we forget China's marbled eggs, as tasty as they are good to look at?

For this, you boil eggs and crack the shells but don't peel them. Now, with the cracked shell, you let the eggs cook in a pot of water that has a tea bag, some soy sauce, star anise, cinnamon, pepper corn, and an orange peel. Take the eggs out after 1-2 hours, and then peel them. The eggs will emerge with a beautiful pattern. Another remarkable dish from China is the 100-year-old egg, also called Century egg, alkalised and preserved. I guess it's the season, but I find myself being flooded with some funny and some cringeworthy puns about eggs. The one that caught my fancy said: "Egg main or egg tu, damo miley Easter-ya". You may laugh or wince, but you may have to "crack" a smile.

— The writer is a food critic

Mela Chiraghan, marking the death anniversary of Sufi mystic Madho Lal Hussain, shines bright in Lahore



(L-R) People offer lamps (chirags) at the fire pit, referred to as alao, symbolising the fire of divine love; the writer with a maling, a Sufi dancer; common folks join malangs in the Sufi dance Dhammal. PHOTOS BY THE WRITER

400 YEARS OF LOVE & LIGHT

TARUNJIT SINGH BUTALIA

IN the small, crowded streets of Baghbanpura in Lahore, to the west of Shalimar Gardens, lies the famous shrine of the Sufi mystic Madho Lal Hussain. His Urs (death anniversary) has been celebrated in Lahore for over 400 years and was recently observed with great enthusiasm during the last weekend of March.

This shrine is the final resting place of the 18th-century Punjabi Muslim Sufi poet Shah Hussain and his close companion Madho Lal, a Hindu Brahmin. Shah Hussain (1538-1599) lived during the time of Mughal Emperor Akbar. He was born in the same year as the passing of Guru Nanak (1469-1539), and 42 years after the death of Bhagat Kabir (1425-1496).

Shah Hussain was so deeply in love with a young Hindu boy Madho Lal, from Shahdara, just across the Ravi river, that he changed his name to Madho Lal Hussain. Today, their graves sit next to each other.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh, commonly known as Sher-e-Punjab, who ruled Punjab from Lahore from 1799 to 1839, had profound respect for Shah Hussain, a pioneer of *Kasfi* poetry, who lived in Lahore. Maharaja Ranjit Singh combined the Urs of Shah Hussain with the cultural festival of Basant into one major event called Mela Chiraghan (Festival

of Lights), which was celebrated at the shrine of Shah Hussain. According to historical accounts, Ranjit Singh walked barefoot from his palace in Lahore to the shrine to mark this festival, reinforcing a message of religious co-existence.

The British moved the Urs festival from the shrine to Shalimar Gardens. However, in 1958, the festival was moved back to the shrine.

This year, I was invited by the Ausaf Board (the management committee of mosques) to speak at the festival. As I stood up, the urge to speak in Punjabi took over me. I began with the following *kaafi* of Shah Hussain:

*Rabba, mere haal da, mehntan tu
Andar tu hain, bahar tu hain,
rom rom rich tu
Tu hain tamma, tu hain banna,
sabi kugi mera tu
Kabe Hussain faqir nimana,
nain nain, sabh tu
(O God, you are the all knower of me,
You are inside me, you are outside me,
you are in every cell of mine,
You are the string of music, you are also
the thread of cloth, you are my everything,
Says the lowly Fakir Hussain, I am nothing,
you are everything.)*

Later, as I walked out of the event to experience the rustic festival, the first things that caught my eyes and ears were



a raging fire in a pit and the throbbing sound of over a dozen *dhol*s (Punjabi drums) playing all over the shrine complex. Hundreds of men, women, and children intermingled freely, making it a truly community festival, with people exchanging *jhappis* (hugs) and *pappis* (kisses).

The fire pit, referred to as *alao*, symbolises the fire of divine love. Men and women offered lamps (*chirags*) to the fire along with flowers. It was a sight to behold.

"By my right, *malangs* (Sufi dancers) were swaying to the beat of two large *dhol*s. This was *Dhammal* — a Sufi mystic dance of los-

ing oneself to the beat of drums to experience the divine. I had never experienced this way of connecting with the divine. There were over a dozen such small dancing groups. Each comprised *malangs* and ordinary locals, many with their long hair open. Some of the *malangs* had bells tied to their feet and hands. Next to each dance group was a *langar*, a community kitchen serving free food to all.

Mela Chiraghan is unique as it honours the deep spiritual bond between Shah Hussain and Madho Lal, symbolising unity across religious and social boundaries.

It was a multi-faith festival during the early 19th-century Sikh rule and became a key example of the period's cultural integration, bringing together people of different faiths.

During this year's Mela Chiraghan, I was among the few non-Muslims visiting the shrine to pay respects. Thousands of Muslims bowed their heads with equal fervour at the graves of Shah Hussain and Madho Lal. I hope such interfaith respect and understanding run through South Asia.

— The writer is a US-based Sikh interfaith activist and scholar

Shah Hussain and Madho Lal's graves sit next to each other in Lahore.

ILLUSION VS REALITY

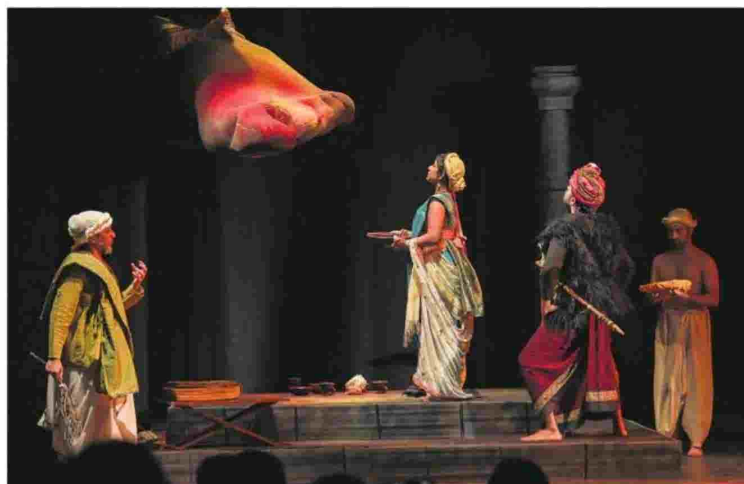
Rooted in the realm of devotion and delusion, *'Mithyasur'* won big at the recent Mahindra Excellence in Theatre Awards

MONICA ARORA

THE phenomenal play *'Mithyasur'*, directed by Ajeet Singh Pallawat, was recently feted with multiple awards at the Mahindra Excellence in Theatre Awards (META 2026). Among the accolades were awards for Best Production, presented to the Ujaagar Dramatic Association and Ved Satpathy; Best Original Script, bagged by Pranay Pandey; and Best Actor in a Supporting Role (Male), awarded to Sahil Ahuja.

The play is based in 18th-century Hindustan and revolves around an ancient temple and its high priest, Somdev, who is guided by the demon king Kumbh via dreams. Indeed, in contemporary times — that are all about digital appearances, and artificial intelligence becoming an inseparable part of our existence — a play rooted in the realm of "devotion and delusion" has generated much interest.

'Mithyasur' comes from the words *'mithya'* or illusion and *'asur'* or demon. As the director, Pallawat, elucidates, "Growing up, I was always fascinated by the mythological stories woven into our daily lives. As I delved deeper into theatre, I realised that the power of illusion and reality are fundamental to the craft."
'Mithyasur' thus becomes an attempt to explore how myths can be both timeless



'Mithyasur' explores the deep influence of myths and stories in the evolution of the human civilisation.

and timely; how they can speak to our contemporary concerns and yet remain rooted in a sense of timelessness. "I think myths have been the best facade to create a sense of disorientation, a sense of questioning what's real and what's not," says Pallawat.

The director wanted to present a story that is set in a world unlike ours, but deals with ideas that are fundamentally human. "Placed in a world of demons and kings, the narrative may appear complex but is inherently quite simple, primarily because we all have grown up listening to stories of *rajus*, *ranis*, *devatas* and *asurs*. Mythology tricks us into a sense of comfort and familiarity, thus allowing us to lose our rigid and preconceived notions. The setting of

'Mithyasur' hence becomes important for this story," he says.

Always intrigued by the power of myth in shaping us as humans and our sense of what is true and what isn't, the otherworldly historical dimension of *'Mithyasur'* became Pallawat's attempt to understand the interplay between power, its abuse and its relation with forces such as religion, state and science.

Vijay Patidar plays the lead character of Somdev. On the process of delving into the depths of faith, he says: "My first and most difficult task was to understand the kind of surrender that would be required for a character like Somdev and then for it to get shattered and what that would mean."

He says it was an immersive process, full of discovering facets of himself, and his own struggles with the idea of being so devoted to someone. "When you come from a small town, a lot of things become a part of your being without you recognising the factual reality of those things. The festivals we celebrate, the deities we worship — it all feels like part of an identity rather than a question of myth versus reality."

"But when you grow up, you start recognising and questioning these traditions and belief systems. What's fascinating and beautiful is that this question is an endless, immortal being in itself. It has presented and will continue to present itself to generations, forever and ever,"

notes Patidar. The play also won Sahil Ahuja an award for Best Supporting Actor (Male). For his character of Rakshas Raj, he underwent a bodily metamorphosis.

"I began doing theatre a decade ago and this was the first time I had to learn the basics of Kutiyattam for a role. The physical references and videos of many Kutiyattam *gurus* made it possible for me to transform my body. Under the guidance of Madhav Chakraborty sir, my eyes and hands learnt a new language and that changed the way I was approaching the character," says Ahuja.

The changes in his body started to alter his speech pattern. The dialogues somehow took shape and resulted in images; some were said in silence. "This was a completely new experience for me. I have never in my life achieved the famous 'walk and talk' of the character in this fashion." Among the other actors were Pratiksha Kote, who plays Revati. She is a woman of substance, who asks questions and takes things in her control for the sake of her dynasty. She says the character draws its strength from the script itself.

"We tried to portray the character through the script. To understand Revati's politics, I studied her lines and where these were coming from. For that, guidance from Ajeet Pallawat and creative and art director Ipsita Singh Chakraborty played an important role," adds Kote.

Pallawat calls himself an ardent student of history and science. He says the research that went into *'Mithyasur'* was not a one-time effort but rather something shaped by what all he has read and understood. He is fascinated by the rich tapestry of Indian kingdoms and their dynamics with powers both foreign and domestic.

"Our history, particularly of the last few hundred years, has shaped us into our society of today. Philosophy based on religion and faith remains highly relevant, offering a counterbalance to technology's frenetic pace," he concludes.

— The writer is a freelance

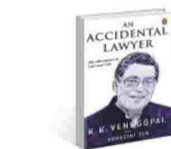
Lawyer's memoir as national history

SANJAY HEGDE

KK VENUGOPAL is 94 years old. He has appeared in over 1,600 reported judgments. He served as Attorney General for India from 2017 to 2022. His father, MK Nambyar, argued the foundational constitutional cases of Independent India, including AK Gopalan (1950) and Golaknath (1967). The son's career spans the Emergency, the anti-Sikh riots, the Mandal agitation, the Babri demolition, the Padmanabhaswamy Temple litigation, and the National Judicial Appointments Commission challenge. When a man of this range writes his memoir, the result is inevitably a document of both personal and national history.

'An Accidental Lawyer' is, in the best sense, an old man's book. It has the unhurried tone of someone who has nothing left to prove and no reputation left to build. Venugopal is generous with credit, naming junior after junior who went on to earn distinction: P Chidambaram, Rohinton Nariman, KV Viswanathan, CS Vaidyanathan. He has co-authored this book with his junior, Subhasini Sen. He has insisted on her being named as his co-author and not merely relegated her to a spot in the book's acknowledgements.

He opens the book with Clarence Darrow's words about writing a plain, unvarnished account. He closes it with an epistle to young lawyers that quotes Darrow again, this time on the futility of age-laying down precepts for



AN ACCIDENTAL LAWYER: MY ADVENTURES IN LAW AND LIFE
by KK Venugopal with Subhasini Sen.
Penguin Random House.
Pages 360.
₹799

young. Between these two invocations of the great American advocate, Venugopal offers 27 compact chapters that move briskly between the personal and the professional.

The personal material is warm and vivid. Venugopal as a barefoot schoolboy at St. Aloysius in Mangalore, scrambling to the top of a human pyramid on Rector's Day. Theyoung man who failed his BSc and stumbled into law. The traveller who made it to the North Pole and to Mansarovar, and who collected antiquarian books with the obsessive eye of a connoisseur. These passages give the memoir its charm. They will appeal to any reader who enjoys accounts of a fortunate life lived with curiosity and good humour.

For the non-lawyer, the book's greater value lies in its window to political events

through their attendant litigation. Venugopal's account of appearing for the DMK when Karunanidhi's government was dismissed during the Emergency, and his subsequent defence of the Shah Commission, reveals how constitutional crises play out in the courtroom. His chapter on the Babri Masjid demolition is particularly striking: it was Venugopal who conveyed Chief Minister Kalyan Singh's assurance to the Supreme Court that the mosque would not be harmed, and it was Venugopal who stood before the Chief Justice afterwards and said he hung his head in shame. The lawyer read in these chapters a political history of India refracted through the prism of advocacy.

For the legal practitioner, the rewards are different. What matters is how cases were handled: the decision to take a brief, the preparation of argument, the management of a professional life across jurisdictions and decades. Venugopal's account of shifting his practice from Madras to Delhi, of building chambers that produced Senior Advocates and Supreme Court judges, and of navigating the politics of the Supreme Court Bar Association, amounts to a practical education in the craft of law practice at the highest level.

The book, however, does no justice to the crafty courtroom warrior that he was. I do wish he had narrated the story of how the heritage structure of the Attam Kacheri, that is the Bangalore High Court, still stands undemolished, because Venugopal knew the sleep cycles of his Supreme

Court judges better than the then advocate general of Karnataka, a certain Mr N Santosh Hegde. When confronted with a split three-judge Bench with a wavering judge, Venugopal took a tactical pause to resume arguments after lunch. He knew that the judge opposing his stand used to have a post-lunch nap on the Bench. The presiding judge then swung the waverer, and the opposition did not persist against a 2-1 majority.

There is, also, silence at the heart of this book. Subhasini Ali, speaking at the launch, noted what others will notice on reading: the Attorney General chapter offers little reckoning with the constitutional questions that arose during those years. On this, Venugopal the memoirist is less forthcoming than Venugopal the advocate. The reader, hoping for a candid assessment of the period from 2017 to 2022, will find the narrative thinning at precisely the point where it might have been most instructive.

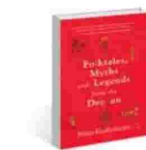
But that is, perhaps, the nature of a memoir written by a man who has acknowledged his good fortune and chosen to dwell on what he has received rather than on what he might have done differently.

'An Accidental Lawyer' is the account of a revered Senior Advocate who has, by his own reckoning, lived well. It does not pretend to be a manifesto or a confession. Read on its own terms, it is a generous, engaging, and occasionally moving record of a life in the law.

— *The reviewer is a Senior Advocate at the Supreme Court of India*



BACKFLAP



FOLKTALES, MYTHS AND LEGENDS FROM THE DECCAN
by Nitin Kushalappa.
Rupa.

Pages 172. ₹295
This work is a collection of traditional tales from the Deccan. The stories revolve around themes that are both timeless and universal: family, love, death, grief. The author gathers 10 powerful narratives and offers a rare glimpse into a region that's home to dozens of languages and dialects — as varied as the stories born of them. Here, local heroes are worshipped as deities, warriors are immortalised as goddesses walk the earth in human form.



MRS HAPPILY SINGLE
by Shubha Sarma.
Niyog Books.
Pages 272. ₹595

In the aftermath of a mysterious disappearance and an unexplained pregnancy, Malini walked out of her marriage and the life she had painstakingly created to forge a new beginning with her daughter, Sonali, firmly shutting the door to her past. But when the nuns in Sonali's convent school demand to see her child's father in flesh and blood, Malini is forced to revisit a world she had forced herself to forget.



BANGARWADI
by Vankatesh Madgulkar.
Speaking Tiger.
Pages 181. ₹399

An unsentimental yet deeply compassionate portrait of rural India, this book examines education not as an abstract ideal but as a fragile, negotiated presence in lives shaped by necessity. First published in 1955, it is regarded as a landmark in post-Independence Marathi literature. This translation by Shanta Gokhale brings Vankatesh Madgulkar's classic to contemporary readers, preserving its austere beauty and its enduring meditation on belonging, responsibility, and the slow work of trust.

The versatility of verse

SUTANUKA GHOSH ROY

THE anthology 'Earth and Embers: South Asia in Verse' was forged in the crucible of 2018-2020 — a time defined by political turbulence and the shadow of a global pandemic. The volume does not seek to impose a singular, unified 'South Asian identity'. Instead, it celebrates a vibrant multiplicity that spans India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, the Maldives, and Afghanistan.

Within these pages, earth and embers, memory and dream, prejudice and protest, pandemic, past and present, all intertwine. While some poems voice a deep concern for ecological precarity, others rise in a crescendo of protest or prayer. Some whisper of loss, pain and yearning, while others strike like thunder and lightning against injustice. Robin S N Gangoo endorses, "It reads these poems and translations is to cross and re-cross borders — geographical, linguistic, and the invisible lines we draw within ourselves — and to carry embers for the days ahead."

The title 'Earth and Embers' is interesting and intriguing. The anthology underscores the conviction that human identity is sculpted both by the land to which we belong and the emotional and historical 'embers' that continue to glow within us.

Ashwani Kumar's poem 'Alzheimer's' evokes mindscapes marked by the relentless march of time through hushed tones registers that mirror a slow erosion: "Alzheimer's comes sheepishly like extramarital affairs, offering instant promise to rejuvenate rotten arteries of lost love... Bereaving the death of my old school headmaster, I fail to remember which

the local cemetery remains closed." Kalyanee Rajan's poem 'Insignia' examines how identity is often 'assigned' rather than 'chosen'. The domestic sphere is not just a backdrop but a site of struggle. "What remains, is what is. Despite Time, its ebb and flow, And its preposterous healings." The 'insignia' might be the imperceptible apron of domesticity or the visible marks of ageing and labour.

The anthology makes a deliberate, structural choice to house its translations in a dedicated segment. By separating these works, the editors ensure that the nuances of regional thought are not "eclipsed" by the dominance of the English tongue.

This separation highlights the vital role of translated poetry in promoting cross-cultural empathy.

"Green heart, heart of hyacinth taken/Heart of garden and nightingale shaken/Like prison's short-lived padlocks right/Every alley in Kabul is shaken", turns to the war-torn alleys of Kabul through the voice of Abdulhadi Sakhanayr Mokhes (translated by Wais Ahmed Afjal). Mokhes presents the "green heart" as a site of profound resistance.

Amidst "prison's short-lived padlocks", the heart remains a 'hyacinth', a garden, a shaking nightingale. His verse is a plea for ecological and spiritual restoration, asserting a powerful truth: as long as the inner landscape remains 'green', the soul possesses an eternal spring that no external conflict can defeat.

The volume under review also reveals how old and contemporary voices across South Asia stretch beyond its conventional boundaries. Taken together, these poems point to a poetic medium that remains grounded in craft and yet remarkably open to new avenues. Through this collaboration, the editors have transformed the collection into a critical landmark that significantly shifts the conversation around modern verse.

— *The reviewer teaches at Tarakeswar Degree College in West Bengal*

KOKKU XAVIER

SOME books are like onions. They reveal layers and layers of meaning. At the outset, it must be stated that 'The Baby Bomb' might be written for children, but it is intended for adults as well. Not many children's books can walk the thin line between being interesting for children and holding the attention of adults as well.

The book takes as its subject matter the feelings and thoughts of a bomb — Baby — whose claim to fame is that his grandfather was Pat Man, the bomb that caused incalculable destruction in Nagasaki during the Second World War. This made Baby earn serious credit amongst the bombs that are shown as being indoctrinated to consider detonation and maximum damage as their only goal in life. But Baby was different. He was afraid to explode and die. He was, therefore, not a 'good enough' bomb. But Baby never told anyone his fears.

Finally, when the time came to explode, Baby held on to the aircraft for dear life. The rest of the book follows Baby's journey as an unexploded bomb.

The book is imaginatively written — one does not feel the need to willingly suspend disbelief that a bomb could have feelings, let alone make friends or any significant contribution to the world. This could be because Baby could also be seen as an allegory of how everyone — children and adults — reacts to peer pressure; how it can be nerve-wracking to be different from the 'norm'; how stifling it can be to carry very personal truths deep inside one's heart.

Sandhu has imaginatively tackled the important issue of armed, sanctioned violence that pervades the world around us. He does mention that the state of children in Gaza and Ukraine prompted him to write this book. In that sense, by his own admission, it is a book about parties who are casualties of wars that they did not

start or have no interest in continuing. The question then poses itself: whose wars are these?

The narrative style is easy to read. There are multiple voices and moments of genuine laughter. The emotions expressed in the book are beautiful in that they genuinely draw you in and make you root for the characters. It is an excellent resource for students of Peace Studies and, of course, for all those who wish to make children understand the need for peace, for being at peace with oneself, for being different and for teaching the value of friendship and community. Adults can also take a leaf out of this book.

Sandhu's work is appealingly produced and the illustrations by Allen Shaw are spot-on. These supplement the narrative rather than overpowering it. The colour scheme is kept muted to possibly depict the dire straits the world is in.

In these times, when chest-thumping and sabre-rattling have dominated our visual and auditory perceptions, works like 'The Baby Bomb' are essential to root us in our humanity and show us the power of non-violence.

— *The reviewer teaches at All Saints' College, Thiruvananthapuram*

Bomb that hates exploding



THE BABY BOMB
by Govind Sandhu. Illustrated by Allen Shaw.
HarperCollins.
Pages 118.
₹499

An unhurried approach to sustainable living

MANU MOUDGIL

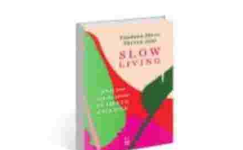
IN a world that runs by the second hand of a clock, going slow can invite ridicule. But it is instead a rebellion. The book 'Slow Living: What You Can Do About Climate Change' is a call to introspect and make choices that are healthier for us and the world around us. Vandana Shiva draws from her experience of grassroots activism and policy campaigning at both global and domestic fronts to bring out comprehensive information on how big capital has pushed us towards inequality and environmental pollution, and how going slow is the only way to get out of it.

The book is part academic and part self-help, thus connecting the dots between global phenomena and individual choices with ease. The authors present useful tips, whether it's about how to grow and maintain a vegetable garden, adopting meaningful fashion, composting your waste or

supporting the local economy. My favourite is the table that lists out which vegetables grow in which geographical location and in which season and how to decide companion plants that benefit each other.

The authors also present some insightful facts like 30 per cent of the food we produce is wasted and avoiding that can eliminate 8 per cent of global emissions, that there will be more plastic than fish in the sea by 2050, or how in the past 50 years 300 new pathogens have emerged due to destruction of wildlife habitats and that new clothes only use 3 per cent of recycled material. The pages are sprinkled with some heritage food recipes as well, combining healthy ingredients with food sovereignty.

The book combines steps towards conscious living with information on how big capital is fooling us. Whether it's the agro-chemical companies poisoning our food or the fast fashion giants wanting us to want more of the disposable clothes they produce on a massive scale, the authors offer alter-



SLOW LIVING: WHAT YOU CAN DO ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE
by Vandana Shiva and Shreya Jari.
Roli Books.
Pages 336. ₹895

natives that are healthier and more sustainable. Connecting with local vendors, choosing diverse produce and recycling waste through composting can go a long way in circumventing the problems of over-consumption, bad health and loneliness. Individual choices can't, however, be the only answer to the global crisis, even if

they do take some power back from the system. Maybe, in the long run, the slow movement will be big enough to count. But with the threat of the climate crisis so imminent, we cannot avoid calling out the big polluters and the political parties shielding them.

Individual action matters at the micro scale, where the choice between a plastic and a paper bag can decide the health of immediate surroundings, which is also important, but to frame it as a solution to the climate crisis is a misnomer. This gets starker when we know that fossil fuel companies have been pushing communication campaigns for the last two decades which shift the blame of emissions onto individual choices. The idea of individual carbon footprint emerged from this strategy. Instead of falling for this conceit, we must demand accountability from the corporates and governments, even as we make changes in our own lifestyles.

The authors dwell on slow democracy,

which goes beyond country-based patriotism and prioritises earth citizenship, and valuing all species equally. It celebrates diversity and inclusion and upholds Gandhian values of non-violence and Satyagraha. Some portions might seem repetitive or arduous, but the book does leave one with a lot of thought and inspiration. A good addition would have been listing contacts of certain credible organisations working in the field of sustainable living. The section on biodiversity, biopiracy, media literacy and data mining but not the different models of alternative schooling that have come up in the country.

Similarly, adding examples of individuals and organisations working in other fields of slow living, like natural textiles and dyeing, could help readers make the required shift.

— *The reviewer is a freelance journalist who reports on environment and governance issues*

REFLECTIONS

Prejudices & internal battles

50 years of the bitten Apple



PRADEEP MAGAZINE

KAPIL DEV once compared Laxman Sivaramakrishnan's extraordinary speed and nimble movements in the field with the suddenness of a snake bursting out of a sack (his words in Punjabi: *'Jiddan bori trichon sap nikalda hai'*). I carry this vivid smile with me whenever I think of the young precocious Sivaramakrishnan was creating waves with his astonishing bowling skills in the first half of the Eighties.

Today, while reading his disarming battles with a world that is in love with the colour white and abhors its darker shades, the young, graceful, electrifying Siva resurfaces in my mind. This slim, wiry, 19-year-old had the world dancing, for a brief period, to his whizzing, whooshing spinning deliveries that held the cricketing fraternity in a trance.

Most of us saw him as a winsome, ebony-hued young man destined for the stars, not a meteoric flame fated to consume itself in a fleeting burst.

The dark clouds that were to engulf his cricketing career were as sudden as his stunning emergence. The purveyor of a bagful of tricks — from a googly to top spin, mixed with sharp leg-spin and an enticing loop — lost it all within no time. Nothing unusual in a sporting world where fame, glamour, riches are a double-edged sword. It can be as easily smothered you as it can make you live in a fantasy world that mere mortals can't even dream of.

Siva, we all believed, was one of the many prodigies lost to the world, unable to handle the extravagant, luxurious goodies on offer for those who make it to the top. It has happened before, it is still happening and, dare one say, will continue to victimise the future "prodigies" of the sporting world.

Maninder Singh, Siva's contemporary, is another story of found and lost, who by his



Laxman Sivaramakrishnan (left) & Maninder Singh.

own admission couldn't handle success. In a world that rewards success with treasures, uneasy lie the heads that chase the crown. Crushing was the burden of his own expectations and that of his peers. Fear of failure and anxiety to do well strangled Maninder's professional need to lead a disciplined life. Alcohol became his refuge and a sense of victimhood his excuse for living life on the edge.

Siva's is a clear case of racism, Maninder's story is of a scared mind pushed to the extreme

Far from becoming a successor to the great Bishen Singh Bedi, Maninder became a mental wreck. In one of the most candid and brave confessions ever made by an Indian cricketer in an interview given to *Cricchet Monthly* in 2019, Maninder admitted drowning himself in a world of self-destruction that alienated him from sanity. Maninder was courageous enough to confront his loneliness and the debilitating effect of self-pity. With the help of a few friends and faith in the divine, he was able to swim out of a delusional world that had left him hopeless and wasted.

Siva's world, as it emerges from his recent interview given to *The Indian Express*, is a more

distressing expose of our deep-rooted prejudices where the colour of skin and racism can destroy people's lives. He was taunted for his dark colour right from the day he entered the cricket field. From age 14 to his present age of 60, Siva says he was lampooned for his dark skin, made to feel lowly and untouchable that developed a deep sense of victimhood in him. He accuses not only the colleagues of his playing days, but the BCCI as well for injustices done to him.

Have heard screams of 'Kalia, Kalia' (dark, dark) and 'Bhoot' (ghost) from crowds in India for the West Indies team, a chant Siva was often targeted with by the spectators inside the stadium. No wonder the West Indian players of his time empathised with him and he became best friends with them. The pain of Siva's traumatic, discriminatory experiences are laced with a reality that transcends caste prejudices and narrows it down to colour preferences.

Siva is often assumed to be a Brahmin though this has never been publicly confirmed. Yet his dark skin, as he keeps emphasising in his revelations, was used against him all the time, by those in power and by those watching him play. In his more than two decades of life as a commentator, he has explicitly shown his scyphonic allegiance to BCCI and yet even that didn't help him get a broadcasting spot during the tussle of any international match.

It grieved him so much that he finally decided to retire from broadcasting and open up his festering wounds for the world to see.

Siva's and Maninder's stories are case studies of prejudices and internal battles with fear and anxiety creating insecurities that can impede the growth of an individual to achieve its full potential. Siva's is a clear case of racism that made him feel inadequate and instilled a sense of victimhood that led to depression, and made him even suicidal at times. Maninder's is a story of a scared mind pushed to the extreme by its own desire to succeed but fearing failure all the time.

In many ways, their revelations are a damning reflection on us — a society whose flawed, conditioned, and complex worldview often proves to be self-defeating, sometimes with devastating human consequences.

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



DILIP CHERIAN

BRANDS are built on a single foundational concept: you believe what the company promises, and in return, give them considerably more money than the product is strictly worth. What makes Apple interesting at 50 is how completely it has made consumers forget they signed that contract. Apple choreographs longing. That the company was founded on April 1, 1976 — April Fool's Day — tells you something about the nature of the trick.

To understand how the brand got its character, you have to go somewhere no connecting flight takes you: a small *ashram* in the Kumaon hills called Kainchi Dham, two years before bitten apples bit the world.

It's 1974. Steve Jobs is 19, broke, signing letters to friends with one word — *shanti*. He travels to Uttarakhand, finds Neem Karoli Baba had passed away the previous year, and stays anyway — for seven months. He wore *khadi*, sat in silence, and watched people who owned almost nothing carry themselves with a dignity he hadn't encountered in any American living room.

The experience of obsessive emptying-out translated, back in California, into a brand conviction: the best product removes rather than adds. Restraint, practised consistently and expensively enough, reads as authority. Simplicity is the most expensive thing a brand can sell. I've seen this across decades of image creation and brand-building. Most companies, given the chance, add. Apple built an entire identity on not doing so, then charged a premium for the absence.

When Apple wanted to enter India, it was roped into a trip to Hong Kong to explore one of their major distribution partners — a demonstration of how retail should be managed at scale. The argument was seductive: standardise every touchpoint globally and premium positioning protects itself.

What that model (as also IKEA, which I helped navigate for its India entry) consistently misses is that channel uniformity and brand consistency are different things entirely. One is operational. The other is cultural. The Indian market has a way of battering these assumptions softly but thoroughly. One size does not fit *desis*. As brand exercises go, each adaptation, I'd suggested then, was a battleground of navigation into nativist territory.

Apple's genius lies in engineering captivity alongside aspiration. The phone, watch, the laptop — the ecosystem works seamlessly until you try to leave. Then everything feels slightly off. Switching becomes emotional, a feeling of loss rather than a technical inconvenience. That is brand architecture working exactly as intended.

In 2016, it removed the headphone jack and explained it to the world with

one word: courage. It then collected 4.5 dollars in licensing fees for wireless accessories that rushed in to fill the hole it had just made. Billions in aggregate. Courage was also a line item.

Even controversy feeds the machine: when Batterygate broke in 2017 — Apple admitting it had slowed older devices. The outrage was genuine, but it also reinforced the logic of the upgrade cycle. Brand power is when the scandal quietly becomes the pitch. We've seen this work, only for brands that have thechutzpah to ride-past controversy, while hearing the cash registers ring melodiously.

The iMessage colour system works on identical logic. Blue for iPhone, green for everyone else — a chromatic caste system across a billion screens, social architecture dressed as interface design. Privacy is where it gets clever: Apple's App Tracking Transparency positioned the company as the guardian of user data while systematically disavowanting ad-driven competitors. Privacy became a premium proposition.

In a data-hungry world, Apple sells the promise of control — at a price. As Scott Galloway puts it: Apple doesn't sell you a phone, it sells you a velvet rope. And nobody wants to be on the wrong side of it.

The core of this neuro-biome of brand architecture is difficult to get right. Yet, Apple has mastered it and then manufactured it with margins that make many competitors weep. The game is that you pay through your nose to enter a walled garden where the flowers will at will, and yet you're so captivated that you can't spot any moat.

The iPhone arrived in India the way all aspirational objects did — through someone's *Mamma*, returning from abroad. Import duties made it cost twice what it did in America, which had the entirely predictable effect of making it more desirable. Scarcity, engineered or accidental, is among the oldest instruments in the branding toolkit.

Today, Tata Electronics assembles iPhones in Hoar; Tamil Nadu, India has forced some recalibration — local manufacturing, EMI schemes, festive offers, a tacit acceptance that Indian consumers will compare, bargain, and occasionally defect. The aspiration, though, holds firm. If Maruti democratised mobility, Apple has democratised aspiration — on EMI.

One instructive Indian parallel is Royal Enfield. Born British in 1901, substantively Indian since the 1960s, Bullet rhythms closely with Apple: both self-identify more than product, both survived near-extinction by returning to brand dignity rather than broadening their proposition in a panic. Forty per cent of Royal Enfield's apparel buyers don't own a motorcycle. Apple's logo appears on bags belonging to people who've never written a line of code. The product is proof of membership. The brand is the membership itself.

Fifty years on, Apple's real product is neither the iPhone nor the Mac. It is a belief — carefully engineered, tightly controlled, and relentlessly monetised. And like all belief systems, it demands devotion. Preferably with a credit card.

—The writer is an Image Guru



Apple's real product is a belief that demands devotion.

Belonging to the mountains

SIXTY-ONE years ago, almost to the month, I made the highland of Mussoorie in the Ghatwaj foothills my home. It was a sunny afternoon, and by my side was a gentle-faced elderly lady — a bit of a loner by circumstance, like me. I had mentioned in passing that I wanted to shift from Delhi, where I had been living somewhat unhappily for a couple of years, and she was showing me the vacant upper floor of her home — an old, isolated cottage at the edge of a forest of oak and maple, green, red and gold.

You couldn't see the Himalayas, or the Doon Valley below, for the cottage was tucked away in the shadow of a hill. But it was spring and when I opened the window of the small living room, the forest seemed to rush upon me, as if in welcome. And from the deep ravine rose the sweet, haunting call of the Himalayan whistling thrush. That decided it for me — the forest, which seemed full of possibilities, and the birdsong. I moved into the cottage — it was called Maplewood Lodge — and settled for good in these hills.

I was still young, and in my romantic frame of mind. I was susceptible to magic casements opening wide. I decided I would make a window-seat at the fire on a summer's day, writing lyric poetry... But long before that could happen I was opening tins of sardines and sharing them with Miss



UNIVERSE RUSKIN BOND

I am too old now to walk among the noble oaks and deodars and the ancient pines, but I feel their presence at all times

Bean, the elderly lady who continued to live in the rooms below me. It was a solidarity of the innocent! I went away from the hills at times, but returned as soon as possible, and

when I had to leave Maplewood, I rented other homes, each one old and modest, but always with a view.

Once you have lived with the mountains, you can never leave. You belong to them. Sometimes it is hard to believe that I have been here all these years — sixty summers and monsoons and winters, and the short autumns and even shorter Himalayan springs (there is no real spring in the plains). When I look back, it seems like yesterday when I first came up with my meagre belongings and a head full of dreams. I like to think that I have become a part of this Magic Mountain; that by living here for so long, I can claim a relationship with the trees, wild flowers, even the rocks that are an integral part of this landscape.

I am too old now to walk among the noble oaks and deodars and the ancient pines, but I feel their presence at all times. The wind brings me their words of wisdom and encouragement when my spirits are low, and their benediction when I give myself freely in love and friendship. They have seen these hills change and yet remain the same through countless seasons — renewing and healing themselves and all the life that lives upon and within them.

Excerpted from 'Scenes from the Magic Mountain: Five Seasons in the Mussoorie Hills and Beyond' by Ruskin Bond. Published by Speaking Tiger Books

Gas what, the chullah may just see a comeback



RAAJ BHASIN

AS a species, we humans have been on our planet for only a flash in its long history and yet, somewhere in our heads, we think we are going to be around for a while. We even plan for this. Even though we seem to have a mental geometric progression in seeing how much damage and destruction we can cause in the least amount of time. Just take a look around.

The conflict in West Asia has impacted just about everything. Across the world, the pinch has been felt in numerous ways. Way down on the scale of lies, pointless deaths, destruction, misery and discomfort, is our fear of running out of cooking gas cylinders. The way toilet rolls were gathered and hoarded in the western world at the start of the

Covid pandemic, a similar status may be accorded to LPG cylinders in India. Even if the toilet roll is easier to handle (or hoard). Even if it has a nastier purpose. Short of giving the standard blessing, "May you live long", to the cylinder every morning, one has done just about everything to be as miserly and respectful as possible with its use.

Hot water is taken from the electric geyser and only then used over a cooking gas flame. Like several others across the country — who I'm sure are also doing this — the evening ends by building both muscle and stress by manipulating the gas cylinder to and fro. This is not to pretend that the cylinder or I are yoga masters or chiropractors, but this is to try and gauge how long it shall continue to grace us with its benign presence.

The solitary electric plate can hardly suffice for a family and a dog whose appetite belies its small size. It has been mentioned that we may have to move to another city and a PNG connection.

At the same time, yet again, for no fault of theirs, my friends in the tourism-hospitality industry are looking worriedly at the months ahead. Summarising what all of them sense,

one said: "We are always the first to suffer and the last to recover." For cooking, many have been compelled to shift to electricity and even kerosene. Rows of induction stoves stand parked like a reserve force that is all ready to sally out when summoned. Those who are in rural areas, in some measure, have reverted to wood.

To state the obvious, here, the earnings of summer are expected to act as a buffer for the lean months in the tourism-dependent economies of Kashmir, Himachal and Uttarakhand — and several other places. While the severe impact of the Covid years is still rattling around, on wings of cretins, this 'summer buffer' seems to be flying out of the window. It's not without reason that the industry has minimal faith in government

Way down on the scale of lies, pointless deaths and destruction is our fear of running out of cooking gas

support where utterances of help have turned out to be just promises in the wind.

The shrapnel of this blast will go far and wide. From hoteliers and transporters to porters to *dhabs-wallahs*, everyone will be impacted. Even the government won't get its chunk of luxury tax. While we are at it, a splinter or two is likely to find its way to 'Yours truly'.

Before our family had a gas connection, which was a prized item in the late 1960s and early 1970s, we had a massive coal-burning *chullah* and electric hotplates in the kitchen. Through the good offices of a family friend, a cooking gas connection and stove arrived. That set of gas burners held a measure of trepidation as, in those early days of something that is indispensable today, apprehensions flew thick and fast about its safety.

In our neighbourhood, we were pioneers of sorts and were to be held responsible should any mishap take place. Quickly, that old coal-burning stove wound its way out of our kitchen and lives. But while it lived and burned, this was a thing to behold. For one, it took over a good chunk of kitchen space. The coal used in the grates was not the 'steam

coal' which went into the fireplaces, but was something called *chok*. This had nothing to do with the drink or drug, but was something like processed coal that yielded greater heat and lesser smoke.

This monumental *chullah* was made of brick and cement with mud plastered over — and the plastering took place on a regular basis. It had five burners on top, one in the centre which was flanked by a pair on either side. Just below the centre one was an iron-encased oven and from what may sound like a primitive device emerged some wonderful bakes.

At night, coal dust, *keri*, was poured over the centre burner and a small hole pierced in the centre. A large cooking pot full of water was placed over the smouldering fire, which would be resuscitated in the morning. There was nothing romantic and lovable about that *chullah*. It just happened to be there in the absence of other cooking methods. As far as I'm concerned, there is very little lovable about piles of ash, soot-blackened walls and smoke-filled rooms. Well, for all you know, we may end up going back to them.

—The writer is a Shimla-based author

The transgender rights amendment Act is raising fears of privacy violations and undoing years of hard-won legal, social gains

SEEMA SACHDEV

REGRETTING the hasty passage of India's Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Amendment Bill, 2026, without adequate stakeholder consultation, the United Nations Human Rights posted on its X handle on April 2: "The amendments risk setting back hard-won rights of transgender people, replacing self-identification with mandatory medical verification processes. India has been a pioneer for rights of transgender and gender-diverse people. This Bill will have far-reaching impacts on the right to privacy and risk the marginalisation of transgender people."

The UN human rights watchdog's comments echo the fears of the transgender community across the country. A major concern is that the new Bill, which received Presidential assent on March 30, changes how transgender identity is legally recognised and protected in India. The most significant shift is the removal of the right to self-perceived gender identity, which has been replaced by a mandatory state-led medical verification process.

While socio-cultural identities like *kiner*, *hijra*, *aravani* and *jogta*, besides persons with specific congenital biological or intersex variations, have been defined as transgenders, it leaves out of its purview trans men, trans women and all other non-binary persons. All this significantly alters the framework established by the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019, and the 2014 NALSA (National Legal Services Authority) judgment, which upheld the right to self-determination as a fundamental right under Article 21 (Right to life and dignity).

The changes will affect an estimated 4.87 lakh transgender persons in the country who come under the 'others' category as per the 2011 Census. Meanwhile, the Kinsey scale measures the number to nearly 10 per cent of the population.

VOICES FROM THE MARGINS

"We are challenging this Act in light of the 2014 NALSA judgment and the 2017 Puttaswamy judgment on privacy," says Mumbai-based diversity expert Zainab Patel. She filed a petition in the Supreme Court on April 4, along with Laxmi Narayan, Bipathi, her co-petitioner in the NALSA vs Union of India case.

While the landmark KS Puttaswamy ruling had declared that sexual orientation and gender identity are integral components of privacy, non-discrimination, and individual dignity, directly supporting the rights of transgender and LGBTQIA+ individuals, the Supreme Court decision in the NALSA vs Union of India judgment had recognised transgender people as a "third gender", granting them fundamental constitutional rights. The court affirmed the right to self-identify as male, female, or third gender without medical intervention, entitling them to legal protection against discrimination.

"The haste with which the Bill was introduced, passed and given assent is questionable. For years, the government sat over data without enacting schemes or spending allocated budgets. And now there is a tearing hurry to implement a system to ensure 'the right beneficiary' is identified. For the past few months, the National Portal for Transgenders has not been effectively working and now no new applications

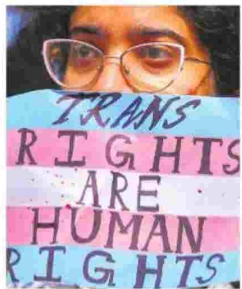
Identity at risk



The transgender community has come out in protest against the legislation, which it claims will affect an estimated 4.87 lakh non-binary persons. (PTI)

are being accepted. All this Act has done now is to create fear mongering. The current provisions have so many similarities with the draconian Criminal Tribes Act of 1871. It seems that the government is using this to enable law enforcement agencies to bring in more punitive measures. A tough fight lies ahead for us," says Zainab.

"This is an attack on identity. The Bill shows a very flawed, criminalising understanding of trans identities. Once the Act is notified, the problems for our community will increase manifold," points out trans woman Rudrani Rajkumari, who has spent years trying to build a life on her own terms — leaving home, navigating hostilities, and trying to complete her education. She now fears it will be difficult for her to return to her native state Assam. She will turn 35 soon, and her aim of becoming a lawyer one day appears a distant dream.



The new law is not an abstract policy change, she says. "It is something that could determine whether I am recognised at all — whether my identity is accepted, questioned or denied."

"About 32,000 transgender (TG) identity certificates have been issued so far. Even before this Bill became an Act, members of the community who had accessed the TG card were contacted by the District Magistrate's office, etc. There are fears that the TG cards will be taken away and everyone might have to undergo the entire medical process of establishing their gender," says Rudrani. "Our bodies might be violated in the name of medical scrutiny where other people will have the authority to decide if we deserve to be recognised as trans persons or not."

"The Act will make things many times worse than what we face now. Tomorrow, if I'm walking on the road, anyone can harass and attack me. I cannot go to the police or seek protection because my identity as a transgender person is not recognised," fears Rudrani.

"I identify as a trans woman. I have my PAN card, Aadhaar card, passport, Provident Fund account. Tomorrow, if the government says I am not a trans person, it definitely means I will not be a woman. If I'm not a woman, I'm not trans — then what does that make me?" questions Zainab, the only out-and-open trans person to be in the Indian UN network.

REVERSAL OF PROGRESS

For activists like Mx Dhananjay Chauhan, the Act will undo years of hard-won progress. Chauhan, the first openly transgender person to take admission at Punjab University, Chandigarh, has spent years pushing institu-

tions to recognise transgender rights. Through sustained activism and legal interventions, this transwoman has helped secure separate hostels and washrooms, fee waivers, reserved seats, and anti-discrimination protections for transgender students.

She was also involved in setting up transgender welfare boards in Punjab and Haryana, besides establishing a transgender protection cell in Punjab Police.

"All that I fought for has come to naught. What will happen to all that activism?" she asks. "This raises a question mark on everything. When there is no self-perceived identity who will come to universities to study?"

Chauhan, who has undergone gender affirmation surgery, points out that many transgender individuals today live outside traditional *dera* or *hijra* community structures, building independent lives, careers and relationships. By excluding them altogether, they risk being ostracised, she says.

"Since the Bill was passed, I have been flooded with calls from the community, especially from those living outside the *deras*. They are worried about what to do, where to go. They struggled so much to become role models in society, to build their identity. When that identity is taken away, where will they go? There is no home, no support. They have been thrown out of their homes, out of the society. Their biggest worry is that if they cannot access surgery or declare themselves as transgender, what will they do?" adds Chauhan, who is also a member of the Transgender Welfare Board of Chandigarh.

CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

At the legal level, the uncertainty is equally stark. One of the most pressing con-

cerns is what happens to those who have already been recognised as transgender persons, points out Jayna Kothari, Senior Advocate at the Supreme Court.

More than 30,000 persons have been issued transgender identity cards under the existing system. It is even more problematic for those who have not yet obtained TG cards but have already legally changed their names and gender markers across documents such as Aadhaar, PAN and passport. They are living in their chosen gender identity of male, female or transgender, she says. "What happens to them going forward? When they use their documents, will they again be questioned? Will they be told they are no longer transgender and cannot use their chosen name or gender?" questions Kothari.

Another major concern is the addition of new criminal offences under Section 18. This not only covers kidnapping or forcing a person but also includes those who use 'undue influence' to make someone dress as transgender or undergo treatment. The offence carries a punishment of up to 10 years.

"This puts a lot of support persons at risk. Doctors, caregivers, activists, supporters and members of the community are concerned because even helping someone could be construed as undue influence," she says, adding that many individuals are already undergoing hormonal treatment, which cannot be abruptly stopped.

This could create a chilling effect. Healthcare providers may withdraw services, community networks may weaken, and individuals could be left navigating their journeys in isolation, she warns.

WELFARE TO REGULATION

The concerns go beyond legal ambiguity and fear is already being felt on the ground, says Zainab. Medical providers are beginning to deny surgeries and other gender-affirming care, awaiting government instructions. Law enforcement advisories, though not new, are taking on a more punitive tone in the current context, she shares.

"The biggest challenge is involving the public healthcare system. Beyond metropolitan cities and a few tier-one or tier-two cities, the condition is extremely poor — even for basic hospitalisation or certification. Where is the capacity within the government to set up so many district-level committees? Where is the time or trained professionals? And where does one go for grievance redressal if a certificate is denied?" she asks.

And what about privacy? "They are going to examine your body — this is a clear violation of dignity, bodily autonomy and equality. Which government scheme requires you to undress before an official?" asks Zainab.

Kothari points out that before the NALSA judgment and the 2019 Act came, welfare boards of some states required medical proof. "Even when trans persons had undergone surgery, they were made to strip for proof. The process was extremely dehumanising. That is precisely what the NALSA judgment sought to end by recognising self-identification. The latest developments risk reopening all of that." So, beyond the certificate, "which itself is a privacy violation, if the authorities are still not convinced, what more proof can one give?" asks Kothari.

Why India needs urgent strengthening of consumer justice system

PUSHPA GIRIMAJI

RISING disposable incomes, digital transformation, young consumers, and the attitudinal shift in spending are all changing India's consumption patterns. By next year, India will be the third largest consumer market in the world. These developments, coupled with increasing cross-border e-commerce, the complexity of global products, AI-driven devices and services, all call for urgent measures to step up consumer protection. This requires urgent strengthening of the consumer justice system to meet the increasing challenges that the consumers will face in a complex, globalised market.

A quantitative analysis of the capacity and performance of consumer commissions, published by a civil society group — India Justice Report — comes in handy here. The comprehensive study, titled 'Consumer Justice Report, 2026' (CJR), draws on government data available in the public domain and obtained through the Right to Information, to pinpoint the structural weaknesses in the system and the gaps in implementation.

A reading of the report in fact reminds me of the aphorism — "the more things change, the more they stay the same". Because, even though we have a new consumer protection law, some of the problems that persisted with the consumer justice system under the old law of 1986 continue even today. I say it with reference to the continued indifference of many state governments and UTs to fulfilling the statutory

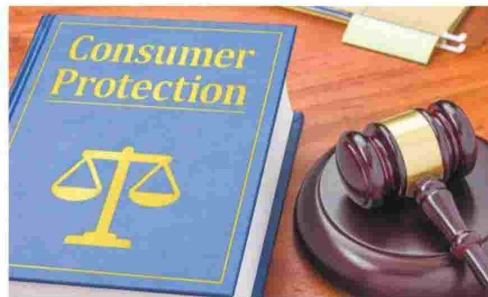
mandate vis-a-vis the Consumer Protection (CP) Act of 2019. For example, the adjudicating members, comprising judicial and non-judicial members, form the fulcrum of the consumer justice system. Yet state governments have been consistently neglecting their appointments. This has been a persistent problem from the very beginning. And now, one of the key points that emerges from the CJR is the large-scale vacancies in the consumer courts and its consequences on the quality of justice.

The CJR shows that last year, 17 of the 35 State Consumer Disputes Redressal Commissions (SCDRCs) did not have a president (judicial member). Three state commissions did not have any (non-judicial) member, while seven of them had only 50 per cent of the mandated strength of members.

Since most consumer cases go before the District Consumer Disputes Redressal Commissions (DCDRCs) because of the pecuniary jurisdiction (up to ₹50 lakh), their infrastructure is of utmost importance. However, out of a total sanctioned strength of 1,384 DCDRC members in the country (2025), only 849 members were in place! Out of 646 sanctioned posts of presidents of DCDRCs, only 439 were in position.

Similarly, under the CP Act, there should be at least one DCDRC for each district. Yet, the 2025 data shows that there were only 685 DCDRCs for a total of 775 districts.

In fact, the latest data (February 11, 2026) provided by the Ministry of Consumer Affairs to a Parliament question further amplifies the problem of persistent vacancies



Besides the systemic neglect of consumer commissions by states, there is a wide gap between legislative intent and implementation

As on December 31, 2025, there were 548 vacancies in DCDRCs around the country and 93 vacancies in SCDRCs. And as of January 2026, over 5.74 lakh cases were pending before the commissions, the largest being 4.36 lakh before the DCDRCs.

The CP Act puts a timeframe of 90 days for disposal of cases. The CJR's analysis of case disposal shows that between 2020 and 2024, the district panels took on an average 409

days and 12 hearings to decide a case.

The state commissions took 236 days and an average of seven hearings, while the national panel took 280 days and six hearings during that period.

It's not all bad news, however. A positive factor that emerges from the study is the considerable improvement in the case clearance rate of consumer courts during 2020-2024, with state and district panels disposing

of 88.6 per cent of the total 7.6 lakh cases filed before them during this period.

As many as nine states and three UTs showed a case clearance rate of 100 per cent and above during this period. The latest government data reports further improvement in the NCDRC and a dozen SCDRCs since July 2025, but the test lies in the number of days taken for the decisions. Over 1.62 lakh cases were filed and 1.5 lakh disposed of in the country in 2025.

The report also makes states based on 11 indicators falling under four broad matrices — human resource, workload, gender diversity, infrastructure and budget (allocation and utilisation). Even though Andhra Pradesh was ranked first based on these matrices, its score was only 6.28 out of 10 because of poor scoring in vacancy (2025). Haryana, which ranked sixth with a score of 4.90, did not have any vacancy (2025) in the SCDRC, but its percentage of cases pending for over three years (2025) was high: 35.6 per cent. In fact, in the Kerala SCDRC, 79.2 per cent of cases were pending for over three years. Jharkhand, Jammu and Kashmir and Uttar Pradesh also recorded high percentages of cases pending for over three years in their SCDRCs.

All in all, the picture that emerges from the report is of systemic neglect of consumer commissions by states and a wide gap between legislative intent and implementation. Consumers must now use the data provided by CJR (available online) to actively push for course correction.

—The writer is a consumer affairs expert



In order for me to write poetry that isn't political I must listen to the birds, and in order to hear the birds the warplanes must be silent

Manvan Makhour

KINGS AND RULERS: WHEN THE CROWN GOES TO THE HEAD

AMERICA was born in revolt against a mad king who forced a tax on tea. The exit of King George III and the formation of the US of A is a chapter of history that aged well...

History offers some clues, Roman Emperor Caligula, aka Gaius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, led an invasion of Britain in 40 CE...

Cut to the present era of grand illusions. Trump maintains this tariff is a \$80-billion success story. Fact check: the US Supreme Court ruled against it...

The question is whether the US bears or listens. German Emperor Kaiser Wilhelm II sacked Otto von Bismarck in 1890 as he desired global expansion...

THE THIRD EYE

SHANKAR AIYAR Author of 'The Gated Republic, Aadhaar: A Stochastic History of India's 12-Digit Revolution and Aadhaar India' shankar.aiyar@gmail.com

Iran attacked other Gulf nations and choked Hormuz. His surprise is incredulous as both his Intelligence Director Tulsi Gabbard and CIA Director John Ratcliffe testified before Congress that 'Trump had been warned about the fallout...'

Leaders with unprecedented victories or fortuitous rise to power often suffer from hubris—a list that includes Margaret Thatcher, George W Bush and Tony Blair in the modern era...

There is a thin line separating narcissism from out-of-body delusions. Trump loves awards—even those given to others. He likes to be praised regularly, like King Lear...

The past is not necessarily a prologue, but it does illuminate personalities going off-kilter. Caligula declared himself a living god; his court played along till his Praetorian guards killed him...

A year back, Trump told an interviewer: 'I run the country and the world.' Today, his Nato allies are not willing to clean up his mess, the courts are not playing ball, the trade deal with China is iffy...

INTO THE ERA OF TECHNO DIPLOMACY



OPINION

SHASHI THAROOR Lok Sabha MP, Chair of the Standing Committee on External Affairs and Sahitya Akademi-winning author office@tharoor.in

THE contemporary international system increasingly reflects a paradox: deep economic interdependence coexisting with profound strategic distrust. Globalisation has integrated markets and supply chains...

Over the past three decades, yet recent developments suggest that integration has not produced political convergence. Instead, economic links are increasingly being deployed as instruments of pressure and leverage...

The erosion of trust among major powers further complicates this picture. Countries remain deeply interconnected economically, yet political confidence between them has diminished. The result is a system in which States continue to rely on each other economically while simultaneously seeking to reduce strategic vulnerabilities...

The notion of a cooperative 'global village', once the defining metaphor of the post-Cold-War era, appears to be giving way to a far more competitive environment in which nations openly use trade restrictions, tariffs and export controls as tools of statecraft...

several partners; another, China's decision to restrict the export of critical rare earth minerals to India and the US. Supply chains themselves have become geopolitical battlegrounds.

The present international landscape is now less a coherent structure than a mosaic of intersecting crises and competing priorities. Security rivalries, technological competition, climate pressures and economic protectionism now interact in ways that make the global system far less predictable than in earlier decades.

The strategic environment is also being shaped by the growing role of emerging technologies. A defining transformation in contemporary geopolitics is that technological infrastructure has replaced territory as the primary arena of strategic competition.

The ability to exclude countries such as Iran or Russia from international financial networks demonstrates how control over technological systems can translate directly into geopolitical leverage. The US and its partners have attempted to restrict China's access to advanced chips and manufacturing equipment...

The current hierarchy in these domains is far more concentrated than the geopolitical distribution of power

itself. AI, digital infrastructure and data governance are rapidly becoming arenas of competition between major powers. This technological rivalry overlays the existing geopolitical rivalries, producing a much more complex strategic landscape.

In this sense, data has become the new currency of geopolitical influence. Nations that command the pipelines through which information flows—digital platforms, financial messaging systems, data storage networks—possess a form of structural power that can shape the choices of others without firing a single shot.

In an environment where nations are increasingly pursuing diversification strategies—building alternative supply chains, expanding trade partnerships and strengthening domestic capabilities—diplomacy requires not rigid alliances, but flexible engagement across multiple partnerships.

exercise geopolitical agency than during the Cold War, the digital architecture of the global economy remains dominated by a relatively small group of technologically advanced powers. For middle and rising-power States such as India, the challenge lies in navigating this environment without allowing technological dependency to translate into strategic vulnerability.

The balancing act that has become a central feature of modern statecraft.

For countries like India, this transformation carries profound implications. Strategic autonomy in the 21st century will depend not only on military capability or economic strength, but also on technological resilience—the ability to build, regulate and secure one's own digital ecosystem without succumbing either to data colonialism from the West or digital conquest by China.

This raises an important strategic question: can technological autonomy coexist with deep global integration? For India, the answer lies not in isolation but in carefully cultivating indigenous capabilities while remaining open to international collaboration.

The goal, ultimately, is digital sovereignty—the capacity to engage confidently with global technological networks without surrendering control over one's own data, infrastructure and strategic pathways. The future is now. We must seize it.

(Views are personal)

BEYOND SCREEN HABITS & SOCIAL MEDIA BANS



OPINION

GEETHA RAVICHANDRAN Former bureaucrat and author of 'The Spell of the Rain Tree'

WHEN social media opened its portals two decades ago, users reacted with a sense of wonder. It was like stepping into a brave new world of promise. The onboarding was seamless, it involved no cost and offered opportunities for new and profitable connections...

India has an estimated 50 crore unique social media users, according to research firm DataReportal. With cheap data and wide access to the internet and smartphones, the country's market is attractive to social media companies. Thus, the conduct of Big Tech is of relevance to users in India.

Recently, a California jury awarded \$6 million in damages to a young woman after finding Meta and Google liable for

mental health harm caused by their addictive platforms that she began using as a child. The landmark judgement considered the structural design of the platforms and their algorithm-driven operations that reward prolonged engagement and doomscrolling.

The effect of social media on children is an area of emerging concern. Researchers have pointed out that children are vulnerable not only to inappropriate content but also to behavioural and developmental issues. The amount of time spent on social media affects academic performance, disrupts sleep and alters social dynamics.

Psychologist Jonathan Haidt, author of 'The Anxious Generation', talks about the shift from a play-based childhood to a screen-based one. In the latter, a craving for validation triggers a dopamine loop—when there is diminishing reinforcement, it results in withdrawal and mental health issues. This rewiring of brains when they are at a crucial developmental stage has raised alarms in several countries, with Australia being the first nation to ban social media platforms for children under 16 years.

India, the area of law governed by

the Information and Technology Act, 2000 and its rules has focused on laying down timelines to take down prohibited content, deepfakes and tackle the spread of misinformation. While platforms are protected by 'safe harbour' rules from liability for content, there are changes being proposed in these rules, a move that has raised concerns about freedom of expression and excessive regulation.

However, the urgent debate now is about curbing social media use for young children to tackle screen addiction, erase exposure to unsafe online content and tackle mental health issues.

As a recent verdict in the US accepted, social media platforms reward young brains by rewarding addictive behaviour. While we look at restricting usage among adolescents, we must inform adults on theirills

Karnataka has proposed a law and Andhra Pradesh is contemplating one on this issue. The measures have received the support of educationists who are in a position to observe first-hand the deterioration in the quality of learning and increased distraction. Questions are also being raised about screen-based learning devices that, while

allowing access to large troves of information, encourage scrolling and fail to incentivise in-depth analysis. A trope for the current times is 'writing with thumbs', which seems to prevail over using the brain. With the added use of artificial intelligence tools, the future trajectory of social media growth appears nothing short of dizzying.

However, legislation alone will not be able to handle the growing problems associated with excessive social media use in children. Age verification checks are not foolproof. Guardians need to take measures to ensure that the potential for long-term damage is nixed. When children at a sensitive stage of development are subject to a constant barrage of posts and feeds, it affects the neuro-plasticity of their brain.

For many adults, it is a platform for staying connected, doing business, entering content and even learning. Among senior citizens, it is known to reduce feelings of loneliness. Hence it's essential to create awareness and understanding of the model on which social media is built. These platforms read their users like a book. However, their business practices are opaque and need to be subjected to informed debate.

The Cook, CEO of Apple, recently said, 'I don't want people looking at the smartphone more than they're looking in someone's eyes.' Here's hoping the balance would be maintained.

QUOTE CORNER



It is now proposed that legal recognition of gender identity shall be conditioned upon certification, scrutiny, or other forms of administrative endorsement. What was recognised by the Supreme Court as an inviolable aspect of personhood now risks being reduced to a contingent, state-mediated entitlement...

Justice Arun Monga of the Rajasthan High Court on a petition against lack of reservation for transgender individuals in institutions and jobs

Fundamentally, this is an apartheid regime. There are entire sets of laws that differentiate between Jews and Palestinians. It goes back to 1948.

Yair Dvir, spokesman for rights group B'Tselem, after Israel passed a death penalty law that solely targets Palestinians

We are getting a beautiful view of the dark side of Earth, lit by the Moon. Jeremy Hansen, mission specialist aboard Artemis 1 spacecraft

MAILBAG WRITERS TO newindianexpress.com

Avverting inflation Ref: Be ready to deploy rare measures (Apr 4). The rupee's weakness reveals the exhaustion of conventional RBI tactics, as dollar sales and arbitrage curbs only delay pressure. With crude prices stay stubbornly high, extraordinary instruments such as swap windows, liquidity tightening and import restrictions must be prepared. Inflation's currency sensitivity demands vigil for structural fragility. Babu Crisna, Bengaluru

Zionist socialism Ref: First US jet downed (Apr 4). Why does the West contemptuously call Iran's government a 'regime'? Is it because it's an autocracy? No, many countries today are autocracies, including the West's 'buddies' like Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Egypt. Is it because it's an Islamic theocracy oppressing women? But then, women are worse off in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. In Iran, they go to universities

and work in government departments. I think the reason is Iran's uncompromising attitude towards the Zionist state of Israel. It is the Zionists who have made the West hate Iran. As the Islamic rulers in Afghanistan, Syria and Turkey do not hate Israel as much, they are acceptable to the West. A Kaja Nazimudeen, Ervadi

Questions galore Ref: Endgame ambiguity (Apr 4). When will the West Asia war end? Does Trump know? Does Netanyahu? Or do the Revolutionary Guards of Iran? Will Trump take the responsibility for boring us all then? Then he would be exonerated for half of his war crimes. Are the UK and France serious about opening the Strait of Hormuz? What is happening to this mad world? Philip Alexander, Bengaluru

Moonshot glory Ref: Artemis II astronauts blast towards moon (Apr 3). It's quite fabulous to see the astronauts in zero gravity. Finally, NASA's dream to re-establish human

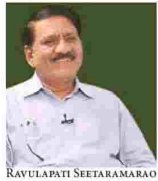
expeditions to the moon has come true. All credit for this success goes to the scientists and, of course, the brave astronauts who are capable of dealing with harsh conditions. Kudos to all of them. Simran Ponjia, Koraput

Unified voice Ref: Congress split on Iran stand as Sharma says politicisation is national disservice (Apr 4). In a clear indication that not all leaders of the Congress are on the same page on Iran, Anand Sharma has pressed for a review in the party's stand that runs contrary to the government's view and has even termed it as a national disservice. Leaders like Kamal Nath and Shashi Tharoor too have expressed discontent with the party's stance and this should unsettle the top leadership, which continues to seek political leverage on the government's ambivalent attitude. This, however, is no time for politicking or seeking to score brownie points. The need of the hour is radical thinking and ensuring unstinted support to the government as these are trying times. CV Aravind, email

Disfavouring Odisha Ref: Shifting of strategic rail stretch sparks backlash (Apr 4). Like George Orwell's quote, 'All are equal, but some are more equal than equal', in India's competitive federal structure, hard bargainers always corner more benefits at the expense of gullible states, be it taking a railway division or a larger share of water in an inter-state dispute. Marginalising some states is not conducive for cooperative federalism. Its number upon all stakeholders should act together or face disaster. Subha Prakash Kanungo, Bhubaneswar

Inhumane treatment Ref: HC slams IT firm for firing staff at office gate (Apr 4). If there is a job, there will be trouble. Once when I was entering my school as a teacher, the manager and ordered the headmaster not to allow me to sign the attendance register. I was stunned and water filled my eyes. I applied for casual leave. After that, I was served a 3-month notice stating that my services were no longer required. G Purushothaman, Tirunelveli

HJ Dora was a rare police 'leader'



RAVULAPATI SEETARAMAO

They say there's fortune in a name. But having fortune in a name is possible only for some names! That luck does not bless everyone. One such special name is that of H J Dora. He recently left us after scaling the summits of fame — winning the admiration of many, earning a beloved family, and serving exceptionally as the police department's leader in his capacity as the DGP. His name is well known not only in the two Telugu states but among those who have served or are serving the department across the country.

If you decode the name H J Dora, a few things naturally stand out. 'H' stands for Hanumanth and 'J' for Jagannayakulu. Hanuman represents strength, power, devotion and steadfastness. Jagannayakulu refers to the supreme leaders of the universe — Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwara. When his parents named him, combining these two elements with the surname "Dora," it was like bestowing life and authority on an extremely capable leader.

Post-feudalism period and at a time when people generally don't like to address anyone as "Dora," many found it natural, respectful and affectionate to call this police officer Dora with reverence. Though some people, who knew him as a man with no enemies, may not have liked him personally — that's natural — even they could not help but address him as "Dora." That is what having fortune in a name means.

Thinking this way shows how much a name can enable a person's character and qualities.

When I was undergoing training as DSP in Anantapur, I first met him — the then district SP. In the police training college, I was doing

commentary in a function. He came up to me personally and congratulated me. His warm, affectionate manner naturally earned my respect. For a newly joined police officer like me, it was a great joy that the SP himself had come over to compliment a trainee on a small thing. Even later, when I came to Guntur as probationary DSP, he came to Guntur on some official work to DPO and while seeing me there he spoke to me specifically. My admiration for Dora grew abundantly. I later learned that his being equally approachable to everyone without distinction was his true nature.

When I took charge as Vijayawada Rural DSP under him in Krishna district, he said, "Welcome! As police officers, we often don't pay attention to children's welfare and health. I will introduce you to a paediatrician. Give their doctor's phone number to your family and take his help to ensure your children's health." At the time I took that as a personal kindness to me and my family. But when I saw that compassionate foresight reflected in the "bhadrath" scheme — specially introduced for the health and welfare of police personnel, including pensioners as DGP I understood his foresight that made him a great leader. "Bhadrath" scheme introduced by him will continue in the department and his name is sure to be remembered forever.

For Dora, loyalty, honesty, and decision making were his constant and consistent professional assets.

To recollect, an example, while serving as a DIG in a range in Andhra Pradesh, he developed closeness with a young journalist. While going with him one fine morning, he casually remarked, "Do you have the habit of taking alcohol first thing in the morning, as we drink coffee or tea?" The journalist was greatly shocked, and that pregnant moment sounded like a warning bell for him to take care of his health. From then onwards the scribe quit the habit, rose to the position of an editor, and all through he has been grateful to Dora. This example shows his impact on others too. Dora will



Post-feudalism period and at a time when people generally don't like to address anyone as "Dora," many found it natural, respectful and affectionate to call this police officer Dora with reverence. Though some people, who knew him as a man with no enemies, may not have liked him personally — that's natural — even they could not help but address him as "Dora." That is what having fortune in a name means.

remain in the forefront when it comes to valuing human decency.

When I was serving as an SP in the intelligence branch, I had to spend almost a month in Vijayawada dealing with very difficult situations and reporting to the intelligence IG — Dora — and to the government. Quite gracefully during that period, he and his wife visited my home in Hyderabad and told my wife, "Amma — we only expected him to stay for a few days, but he must remain there longer. Your family is missing him a lot. Do not hesitate to call us in case of any need." This I came to know in Vijayawada, through my wife, and all the hardship I had undergone vanished in a jiffy. The true reward for hard work is recognition; once that recognition comes, what more would one want?

Putting these experiences aside, I must mention how careful, disciplined and thoughtful Dora was in handling matters. He was responsible for the creation of Greyhounds, which became a fighting force and earned

a good name throughout the country. This force was mainly organised to contain naxalism and Dora made use of the services of K S Vyas, a time-tested police officer, who unfortunately was killed by naxals. The force was supervised by DGP Dora, Vyas and one N S Bhatti, a retired counter-insurgent consultant. This apart, several measures taken by Dora as the DGP, particularly training them in the use of weaponry, discipline and public service stood him in good stead as a rare police leader.

I cannot fail to tell the story of the AP police "encounter" with Naxalites at a place called Koppangani!

I was IG Visakhapatnam. At that time, the local police and Greyhounds had an encounter with Naxals resulting in the death of three policemen and many naxalites in Koppangani in Orissa. When Dora came to know of the incident in Hyderabad, he told me unequivocally "Let me know the real situation. As different versions are coming, including the place of encounter, whether it was in

AP or Orissa. I should present the facts correctly to the government and to the public through the media. If any misinformation goes to them, I will hold you responsible."

Later in a function while presenting small gifts to men and officers for their good work, he suddenly called me and presented a gift with a smile and said, "You briefed about the incident correctly, enabling me to give a factual report to the government and people. Therefore, take this gift."

On the day when a function was organised to remember his great services to the department and to the Telugu people, while offering a floral tribute, I looked at Dora's photo. Suddenly I felt he was alive and smiling at me with a patented twinkle in his eyes. For a while I stood there, later I stepped aside with a heavy heart and blurred eyes, returning to reality.

(The writer is a retired IPS officer, who has served as an Additional DGP of Andhra Pradesh)

From food security to quality food: Telangana's fine rice welfare experiment

AMARAVAJI NAGARAJU

In the landscape of public policy, welfare programmes are often assessed by their reach and scale. Telangana's fine rice distribution scheme, however, introduces an additional parameter — quality. Conceived as an intervention that goes beyond mere hunger alleviation, the programme seeks to improve the nutritional intake of economically vulnerable households. In doing so, it reflects an evolving understanding of welfare as not just subsistence support, but as an instrument of social dignity and equity.

Launched a year ago, the scheme has since expanded across the state with considerable administrative coordination. What began as a targeted initiative has grown into a large-scale public distribution effort, reaching an estimated 31 million beneficiaries through nearly nine million ration cards. The monthly provision of six kg of fine rice per beneficiary underscores both the logistical capacity of the state and its commitment to sustained welfare delivery.

The intervention gains significance against the backdrop of long-standing concerns surrounding the Public Distribution System (PDS). For decades, the system has been criticised for the inconsistent quality of food grains supplied, often resulting in underutilisation and diversion.

By introducing fine rice, the Telangana government has attempted to address this structural limitation. Improved grain quality has not only enhanced acceptability among beneficiaries but also contributed to better dietary practices.

Studies indicating higher nutritional value particularly benefit for children, pregnant women and the elderly point to the scheme's potential long-term public health impact.

Economically, the scheme offers tangible relief to low-income families. With market prices of fine rice ranging between ₹60 and ₹70 per kg,



With market prices of fine rice ranging between Rs 60 and Rs 70 per kg, the free monthly allocation translates into meaningful savings. For many households, this reduction in food expenditure creates fiscal space for other essential needs such as education, healthcare and housing. At a macro level, the programme functions as a significant income support mechanism, reinforcing the state's welfare architecture.

the free monthly allocation translates into meaningful savings. For many households, this reduction in food expenditure creates fiscal space for other essential needs such as education, healthcare and housing. At a macro level, the programme functions as a significant income support mechanism, reinforcing the state's welfare architecture.

An equally important outcome has been the apparent reduction in leakages within the distribution system. Historically, lower-quality ration often found its way into informal markets through diversion. The improved quality of fine rice has altered this dynamic, encouraging direct household consumption and thereby reducing the scope for illegal trade. The shift highlights a key policy insight: improving quality can strengthen efficiency and accountability in welfare delivery.

Technology has played a supportive role in this transition. The integration of digital ration cards, Aadhaar linkage and biometric authentication has enhanced transparency and streamlined beneficiary identification. Such measures have helped reduce duplication and ensure that entitlements reach intended recipients.

Ultimately, the fine rice distribution scheme represents a shift in the philosophy of welfare from ensuring minimum consumption to enabling better living standards. By recognising that access to quality food is integral to human dignity, the programme moves the discourse beyond conventional metrics. As it completes a year, it offers valuable lessons for policymakers: that well-designed interventions, backed by administrative resolve, can redefine the contours of inclusive governance.

Nonetheless, operational challenges persist. Reports of supply delays and occasional quality-related complaints in certain regions indicate the need for continuous monitoring and responsive grievance redressal.

From a broader policy perspective, Telangana's approach introduces an important innovation in welfare design. While most states continue to prioritise quantity under the PDS framework, this initiative foregrounds the role of quality in achieving meaningful outcomes. At the same time, questions of fiscal sustainability, procurement efficiency and long-term scalability remain relevant and warrant periodic review.

As it completes a year, it offers valuable lessons for policymakers: that well-designed interventions, backed by administrative resolve, can redefine the contours of inclusive governance.

Vedism through Hinduism: A 'comprehensive way of life'

VANAM JWALA NARASIMHA RAO

A bedrock of 'Hinduism and Dharmic traditions' and a major foundation along with Indus Valley culture, regional traditions, and later day developments, Vedism originated as a ritualistic culture, and evolved into the philosophical, meditative, and non-dualistic traditions defining modern Indian spirituality. Vedism deeply shaped the entire landscape of Indian religious thought. Vedas are considered the root of many Indian traditions, influencing concepts like dharma and karma. Eventually, it evolved into Brahmanism, and Vedanta, rather than just being a predecessor to Hinduism.

Modern Hindu practices yajna (fire sacrifice) and Gayatri mantra remain direct legacies of Vedic rites. Core philosophical concepts include Brahman, atman, karma, samsara and moksha or nirvana, all articulated in the Vedic Upanishads. The Vedic collective group of principal deities, includes Indra (the warrior), Agni (the fire deity), and Varuna (the upholder of cosmic order), among others.

The Sanskrit language, the medium of the Vedas, is one of the earliest recorded Indo-European languages, sharing common linguistic ancestry with other Indo-European languages. The transition from the ritual-centric karma kanda (Samhitas and Brahmanas) to the

knowledge-centric Jnana Kanda (Upanishads) marked a significant shift toward deeper philosophical inquiry into ultimate reality, including non-dualistic interpretations. Vedism provided an enduring ethical, cosmological, and metaphysical framework known as Dharma.

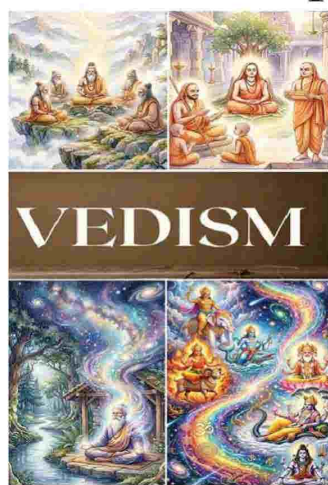
There was no single historical starting point and no central founder to Hinduism. It is an organic and evolving tradition developed over millennia through contributions of numerous thinkers, and sages from all communities. Its roots extend to Vedas and Indus Valley practices. It represents synthesis of local cultures, Vedic rituals, philosophical inquiry, and deep devotional expression. Thus, Hinduism evolved like a vast branching tree of traditions and schools, rather than a constructed system of single founded religion. It emerged as a complete and inclusive way of life.

Hinduism is identified with Sanatana Dharma. The Rigveda, Samaveda, Yajurveda, and Atharvaveda are regarded as its core texts. The Upanishads, teachings of sages, rishis, and later traditions including avatars, contributed to its early development. It accommodates diverse approaches to understanding ultimate reality (Brahman), reflected in the six orthodox schools (Darshanas). Historically various communities together with Brahmins, had their share of contribution to preserve and sustain Hinduism and Sanatana Dharma.

Unfortunately, 'Brahman' community, alone, silently slipped into obscurity. Eminent Acharyas provided commentaries on Vedas, Upanishads, and Bhagavad Gita, interpreting them during the times. Adi Shankaracharya played a pivotal role in revitalizing Vedantic thought by organizing existing Vedic traditions into the coherent philosophical system known as 'Advaita Vedanta' (non-dualism). Ramanuja professed Visishtadvaita and Madhvacharya advanced Dvaita, thereby contributing to a rich and pluralistic intellectual tradition within Hinduism.

The Bhakti movement (devotion) made spirituality accessible to all sections of society. Originating in South India through the Tamil Alvars (Vaishnava) and Nayanars (Shaiva), it gradually spread across the subcontinent and challenged caste hierarchies and ritualistic rigidity, while emphasizing personal love and devotion to the divine. Kabir, Meerabai, and Tulsidas expressed their spiritual insights in regional languages, thereby reaching wider audience.

Veda Vyasa Mahabharata and Valmiki Sri Ramayana brought new narratives and deities into prominence, as more personal and relatable forms of the divine. Rudra evolved into Shiva, the Vedic deity Vishnu rose in prominence, and the progenitor Prajapati came to be identified with Brahma. This



period also deepened philosophical inquiry. Despite these transformations, Vedic Legacy persists within Hinduism. The authority of the Vedas has endured, and they continue to be revered as Shruti (that which is heard).

Many life-cycle rituals, such as marriage remain rooted in Vedic traditions. Similarly, the basic framework of the Varna System, which originated in the later Vedic period, has undergone modification over time but continues to influence social

organization, but unfortunately more on caste considerations.

Hinduism is not a monolithic religion but a diverse tapestry of beliefs and practices that has historically embraced multiple interpretations and adaptations. It places strong emphasis on dharma, or duty, as the guiding principle for moral and ethical conduct. Over time, Hinduism has come to be regarded as a vibrant and complex tradition, reflecting the rich cultural heritage as an 'Evolving continuum.'

The Arya Samaj, founded by Swami Dayananda Saraswati, protested against what it viewed as later accretions or distortions in Hindu practice, including idol worship, pilgrimage, priestly dominance, and advocated the concept: 'Back to the Vedas.' The Brahma Samaj, founded by Raja Ram Mohan Roy, sought to reform Hinduism by challenging idol worship, superstition, and excessive ritualism. Both movements directly questioned the 'Brahmanical monopoly' over 'scriptural interpretation.' Their critics were often met with resistance and counter-arguments from traditional sections of society. Despite facing significant historical, political, and social challenges over centuries, Hinduism, or Sanatana Dharma, has demonstrated remarkable resilience and conti-

Despite facing significant historical, political, and social challenges over centuries, Hinduism, or Sanatana Dharma, has demonstrated remarkable resilience and continuity. Its endurance can be attributed to its inherent flexibility, the absence of a single central authority, and the strength of its cultural practices embedded in everyday life rather than confined solely to temples or scriptures.

relevant force in the modern world, influencing not only spirituality but also culture, ethics, and lifestyle across societies.

Hinduism remains geographically concentrated and is the world's third-largest religion, with a significant majority of its followers residing in India and South Asia, alongside a steadily expanding global diaspora. As of 2026, it is practiced by approximately 1.5 billion people, accounting for nearly 15 per cent of the global population, reflecting both historical migration and contemporary globalization.

Over recent decades, the global Hindu population has grown in proportion with overall population trends, maintaining its relative share while extending its cultural and philosophical influence. The global influence of Hinduism is evident in the widespread adoption of yoga, meditation, and philosophical concepts such as 'karma, dharma, and reincarnation.'

Traditional systems of holistic well-being continue to gain recognition worldwide. Festivals such as Diwali are celebrated globally, reflecting cultural integration across societies. Hindu literature preserves spiritual and philosophical wisdom through texts like the Vedas and Upanishads, while Ramayana and Mahabharata continue to shape ethical values, education, and artistic expression across generations.

INTERNATIONAL EDITORIALS



Opinion

The New York Times

Bondi Failed to Deliver the One Thing Trump Required

Jeffrey Toobin

A contributing Opinion writer and the author of "The Pardon: The Politics of Presidential Mercy."

PRESIDENT TRUMP had many good reasons to fire Attorney General Pam Bondi. He picked the single bad one. When the president announced Ms. Bondi's departure from his cabinet on Thursday, he offered the customary false praise and cold comfort that accompany such defenestrations. But the core of Mr. Trump's dissatisfaction with the attorney general was apparently her failure to serve his need for revenge against his enemies. She did not prosecute enough of Mr. Trump's adversaries, and the cases she did bring were failures.

In a Sept. 20, 2025, message to Ms. Bondi that President Trump posted on Truth Social, he complained that "nothing is being done" about his demand for prosecutions of the former F.B.I. director James Comey, Senator Adam Schiff of California and New York State's attorney general, Letitia James. "We can't delay any longer, it's killing our reputation and credibility," he wrote. In apparent response, Ms. Bondi's Justice Department did later bring transparently defective cases against Mr. Comey (for allegedly lying to Congress) and Ms. James (for alleged mortgage fraud). Both prosecutions were promptly and properly dismissed, but the Justice Department is appealing.

These cases were among Ms. Bondi's worst abuses of the legal system since her appointment, and judges have checked her. But her Justice Department has more such abusive investigations in the works. There is, for example, a federal grand jury inquiry underway in Florida that is apparently aimed at the Obama-era officials who began the investigation of ties between Russia and the 2016 Trump presidential campaign. Mr. Trump and his allies have also demanded a prosecution of Jack Smith, the special counsel who brought indictments against Mr. Trump in 2023.

The fact that Ms. Bondi has failed in these abusive prosecutorial efforts is cause for relief, not dismissal. It's the rest of her record that has turned the Justice Department into an oxymoron that will take years, if not decades, to fix.

Ms. Bondi herself has been a terrible spokesperson for and symbol of the department — disrespectful of its honorable traditions, dismissive of critics, intolerant of dissent — and this was demonstrated most clearly with her inept handling of the Jeffrey



KENT SHISHIMURA/REUTERS

The president wants an attorney general who shares his capacity for vengeance.

Epstein matter. After Ms. Bondi misled the country about her initial disclosures in the case, Congress responded by passing a law forcing the Justice Department to release its files on the pedophile and his allies. Ms. Bondi's delayed, inconsistent and generally incompetent response to the law achieved the seemingly impossible goal of uniting congressional Democrats and Republicans — in disgust at her performance. (Evidently, Mr. Trump was unimpressed as well.)

Still, the deeper problems with Ms. Bondi's leadership rested at the level of policy. Under Ms. Bondi, the Justice Department had all but stopped doing its job of prosecuting crime. Caseloads are way

down, and so is the number of prosecutors — almost certainly a result of Ms. Bondi's leadership. The main reason for these changes is that instead of charging actual criminals, Ms. Bondi's Justice Department has remade itself as the legal auxiliary of Mr. Trump's disastrous immigration enforcement practices.

The worst consequence of the Justice Department's pursuit of cases involving otherwise law-abiding but undocumented individuals is that it has led to untold suffering among those targeted, their families and the economies they support. Ms. Bondi's lawyers have spent considerable time and money on the harassment, and worse, of

people who have done no harm to anyone.

In part because of its fixation on immigration, the Justice Department has cut back on the prosecution of white-collar crime, including through a complete cessation of enforcement of the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act. Local prosecutors can pick up the slack when the Justice Department doesn't prosecute violent crime, but only the federal government has the resources and expertise to bring these cases. White-collar criminals are now getting a free pass, which is how Ms. Bondi and the president have wanted it.

Under Ms. Bondi, too, right-wing culture warriors wield the power of the federal government. The department's storied civil rights division is now headed by Harmeet Dhillon, who has essentially ended its efforts to defend the rights of Black citizens and instead assigned her lawyers to combat "woke" policies and harass the beleaguered trans community. In an administration headed and staffed by 2020 election deniers, the department has begun investigations in Georgia and Arizona that seem aimed above all at putting future election results, including those of this year's midterms, in doubt.

Perhaps worst of all, Justice Department lawyers under Ms. Bondi have often behaved in shockingly unethical ways. For decades, federal judges have looked at assistant U.S. attorneys and other Justice Department lawyers as something more than mere combatants. For good reason, judges assumed that federal lawyers told them the truth about the facts and the law of their cases. In legal terms, the actions of the Justice Department received a "presumption of regularity," which the private bar did not enjoy. But based on the frequently appalling conduct of Justice Department lawyers in the Bondi era — for instance, lying, gaslighting, hiding facts and evidence — many judges are no longer giving government lawyers the benefit of the doubt. Nor should they.

Replacing Ms. Bondi with her deputy, Todd Blanche, or the administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Lee Zeldin, to name two likely successors, will not solve this problem unless the new attorney general makes the commitment, unlikely under the circumstances, that the Justice Department will return to its tradition of honesty and integrity.

With the midterms looming, President Trump may have decided to replace his attorney general while his party still controls the Senate. But whoever he chooses, the future at the Justice Department looks like more of the same, and probably worse.

The Greatest Threat to Our Elections Is No Longer Foreign

Mark R. Warner

A Democratic senator from Virginia and the vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee.

IN THE decade since President Vladimir Putin of Russia directed a sweeping campaign of hacking and social media messaging to try to tilt the 2016 presidential election toward his preferred candidate, the United States has rightly focused on shoring up our elections against foreign meddling.

But I fear that foreign interference is no longer the most pressing danger to our elections. It is increasingly evident that the greatest threat now comes from inside our own government.

For months, President Trump has made his intentions clear. He has called for the federal government to "take over" elections, impose national rules and override state authority. Now we are beginning to see how he may plan to do this.

According to recent reporting in The Washington Post, allies of Mr. Trump's working in coordination with people close to the White House have circulated a draft executive order that would declare a national emergency based on false claims of foreign interference in the 2020 election. That declaration would be used to unlock sweeping presidential powers over how Americans vote.

The proposal would allow the federal government to bar widely used voting methods, including mail ballots. It would force Americans to reregister to vote on short notice, requiring proof of citizenship. It would insert federal agencies into the voter verification process in novel ways. And it would attempt to override the constitutional role of states in administering elections.

And that is just what is envisioned by the draft executive order. Further steps could be justified, at least on paper, by invoking emergency powers. The president could also try to seize voting machines under the guise of a national security investigation. Federal agents could be deployed to polling places in the name of election integrity, intimidating voters rather than protecting them. Entire categories of lawful ballots could be seized or discarded based on unsubstantiated claims of interference.

There is no legitimate basis for such an emergency. That is not the point. The point is that the Trump administration could manufacture an impression of an emergency, creating a pretext for intervention.

There have already been some warning signs. In January, the director of national intelligence, Tulsi Gabbard, was present for a law enforcement raid in Fulton County, Ga., involving the seizure of ballots and voting machine records from 2020. According to Ms. Gabbard's testimony last month before

the Senate Intelligence Committee, she was there at the direction of Mr. Trump. When the warrant affidavit supporting that raid was later unsealed, it revealed no credible foreign interference concern. Instead, the would-be justification for the warrant was a sloop of debunked conspiracy theories that had already been rejected repeatedly by courts, independent investigators and Georgia's Republican secretary of state.

Ms. Gabbard's appearance at this raid — as well as her involvement in seizing voting machines from Puerto Rico, again without any tie to foreign intelligence — was an extraordinary breach of the longstanding firewall between intelligence authorities and domestic political and law enforcement activity. One wonders what else she might be willing to do in service of Mr. Trump's demands: Might she or another Trump official be willing to manufacture a claim of foreign interference to justify federal intervention in elections?

It is worth noting that people who played central roles in efforts to overturn the 2020 election are now operating inside the federal government with access to sensitive election security information and with the ability to influence law enforcement actions. One example is Kurt Olsen, the White House's director of election security and integrity. According to court filings, Mr. Olsen helped trigger the seizure of ballots in Georgia.

To intervene in the midterms at the federal level, Ms. Gabbard would not even need to fabricate intelligence outright. She could selectively release fragments of existing intelligence collection, stripping out caveats and context in ways that create a distorted impression of a threat.

This is not how American democracy is supposed to work. Our voting system is deliberately decentralized. States and localities administer elections, creating a structure that is more resilient and less vulnerable to manipulation from any single point of control. While the federal government can provide resources to help ensure the security of our elections, the Constitution does not give the president the authority to disregard that system.

What we are seeing now is an effort to change that, not through a constitutional amendment but through the abuse of executive power, the making of false claims and the misuse of national security authorities. That effort must be stopped.

First, Congress must assert its constitutional role. That means rejecting efforts to nationalize election administration and conducting rigorous oversight of how federal authorities are being used or misused. State and local officials must also hold the line. They are the stewards of our election system, and their adherence to the law is one of our strongest defenses against interference.



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY ANTHONY GERACE; SOURCE PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDREW HARRIS, JIM WATSON, SAIL LOEB/GETTY IMAGES AND NATHAN HOWARD/REUTERS

Republicans who believe in the Constitution have a particular obligation to speak out. The principle that voters, not politicians, decide elections should not be partisan. Silence in this moment will not be forgotten.

Lawyers across the country must be prepared to challenge any attempt to invoke emergency powers to interfere with elections. The courts will once again serve as a critical backstop — but only if cases are brought quickly and decisively.

Former intelligence and law enforcement officials also have a responsibility to speak out. If they see intelligence being distorted, misused or politicized, they must say so clearly and publicly.

The White House is trying to override our voting system.

Political observers must meet this moment with clarity. Claims about election interference or fraud from this administration must be evaluated with appropriate skepticism and subjected to rigorous scrutiny, not treated as just another political argument in which both sides are granted equal legitimacy.

Most of all, the American people must remain vigilant. Democracies rarely fail in a single moment. They are tested when the boundaries between lawful authority and political power are deliberately blurred. The idea that a president could fabricate an emergency to take control of elections would have been unthinkable not long ago. It must remain unacceptable now.

Starving Cubans Won't Advance U.S. Interests

Ricardo Zúñiga

A career U.S. diplomat who served as President Barack Obama's principal adviser on the Western Hemisphere from 2012 to 2015.

CUBA is undergoing its worst economic and humanitarian crisis in over a century. After nearly seven decades of authoritarian rule, much of the country's population lives in extreme poverty, the power grid is collapsing, and people are fleeing the island in droves. Cuba is hurtling not toward socialism or capitalism but toward ruin.

Atop those miseries the Trump administration has heaped the threat of war and blocked most oil shipments to the island, bringing transportation, food distribution and other basic services to a halt. Administration officials have made clear that 2026 is the year they intend to bring down the country's Communist government. The only thing missing is a plan.

I spent more than a decade working on Cuba as a U.S. diplomat. In that time, I both enforced and unwound parts of the American embargo on the nation that has been in place since the early 1960s, depending on the administration in power and the mood of U.S.-Cuban relations. Before now, I have never seen a greater level of desperation and anger at the government within Cuba nor a greater willingness by the United States to use the suffering of Cuban citizens as leverage in our long-running dispute with their leaders.

For too long, Washington and Havana have allowed outstanding grievances to dictate their relationship. This hostile status quo has done nothing to advance American interests and has only deepened the hardship faced by ordinary Cubans. It's time to stop holding both countries hostage to history, and to build a better path that delivers progress for citizens on both sides of the Straits of Florida.

When I first served as a U.S. diplomat in Havana, from 2002 to 2004, the country was still recovering from a protracted economic crisis that had set in after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Even as the popularity of Cuba's leadership declined amid scarcity and repression, the Castro government retained bastions of support in the Communist Party, the armed forces and the security services. I saw how for these groups, the Cold War remained very much alive, as it did for their rivals in the large Cuban American community.

By the time President Barack Obama assumed office, he viewed U.S. efforts to isolate and squeeze Cuba as Cold War-era anachronisms. He saw no reason to preserve a decades-long approach that had failed to deliver change or improve the lives of those we were supposed to be helping: the Cuban people.

I served on Mr. Obama's National Security Council staff and participated in secret talks that led to the 2015 restoration of diplomatic ties between the United States and Cuba. Nobody on Mr. Obama's team had any illusions about the intransigence of Cuba's leaders, who could not imagine a future in which they were not in sole control of the country. We knew those leaders would negotiate to improve the relationship and to make some marginal concessions, but we also knew that they could be neither charmed nor bullied into accepting the need for serious reform.

So Mr. Obama sidestepped those in power in Havana and focused on the aspirations of Cuban citizens. Mr. Obama's measures included changes to embargo enforcement that helped Cuba's small but emerging private sector, facilitated the entry of U.S. companies, expanded internet access and boosted travel between the two countries. The steps Mr. Obama took shifted the ground under Cuba's leadership by generating expectations of greater prosperity and freedom among Cubans that the stodgy state would be unable to meet without accepting a steady pace of reforms. We be-



ADALBERTO ROQUE/AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE GETTY IMAGES

Negotiation, not force, is needed to bring lasting changes in Havana.

I believed this approach would position Cuba for a democratic transition far better than a pressure-cooker strategy that would only entrench the Cuban government and further impoverish the island.

Although Fidel Castro, who by then had stepped down as Cuba's president, didn't block the negotiations, he never shed his skepticism of the United States, and he rebuffed Mr. Obama's calls for broader economic changes. Regime hard-liners followed his example by slowing engagement with U.S. policymakers and investors. But there remained some optimism among Cubans that there was still a path toward normalcy.

Ten years later, we are in a very different place. President Trump's first-term rollback of most of Mr. Obama's policy shifts effectively closed the door on the kinds of gradual solutions we tried to advance. Tightened U.S. sanctions, the Cuban regime's intransigence and the Covid-19 pandemic combined to push the Cuban economy closer toward collapse. Cuba's leadership does not appear to have any objective beyond retaining its hold on power.

President Trump, for his part, clearly relishes the symbolism around "taking" Cuba and has eagerly embraced coercive language. It's not clear what the administration's underlying objective is other than regime change — something Cuba's leaders will surely resist. On-again, off-again talks between U.S. and Cuban officials suggest that the Trump administration favors a negotiated outcome to the current standoff. But the president's apparent appetite for military intervention to solve political prob-

lems, embodied by his ouster of Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro, has left no doubt in Havana about his readiness to use force.

U.S. military intervention in Cuba could perhaps succeed in toppling the government. It would also be a grave mistake. An attack on Cuba could provoke a catastrophic humanitarian crisis, unmanageable mass migration to the United States and Mexico and an extended civil conflict or insurgency close to U.S. shores.

Even absent a U.S. invasion, a Cuba left to suffocate under stiff American sanctions could veer toward chaos rather than reform. Further economic collapse could prompt a Russian-style political transition, with Cuba's oligarchy mutating into a permanent kleptocratic elite. A destabilized Cuba could also become a magnet for transnational gangs eager to turn a failing state into a hub for money laundering and organized crime.

This downward spiral can still be averted. Though there is no Cuban analogue to Venezuela's Delcy Rodríguez, the Trump administration could use its considerable leverage to negotiate with Cuba's consortium of leaders, pressing them to accept the need for fundamental political and economic change while also convincing them that they will have a place in a more open, more competitive Cuba. An agreement could allow Cuba's armed forces to continue to serve their country should they drop their ideological mission and their domination of the economy. U.S. incentives to undertake economic reforms and promote Cuban entrepreneurship could help right the ship of the country's economy.

In 2014, I witnessed an overwhelming desire by Cubans on the island and in the United States to leave the past behind and start fresh. There is an opportunity right now to marshal the collective strength of all those who are committed to building a successful Cuba. We only hurt our own cause, and that of the Cuban people, by continuing to obsess over defeating adversaries whose time has already passed.

LETTERS

The Rise and Fall of Pam Bondi

TO THE EDITOR:
Re "Trump Fires Bondi After Bumpy Tenure" (front page, April 3):

The firing of Attorney General Pam Bondi is highly unlikely to halt President Trump's assault on the independence of the Justice Department.

No one should expect a new attorney general to re-establish any buffer or guardrails between the White House and the department. If anything, the president will be expected to exercise even greater control over Justice Department prosecutorial decisions and double down on shaping more criminal indictments with a more compliant appointee, to settle scores with his perceived enemies.

Ms. Bondi's juvenile treatment of senators and representatives at recent Senate Judiciary Committee and House Judiciary Committee oversight hearings, when she peppered almost every Democratic panel member with cringy opposition research and insulting comments for merely asking legitimate questions about her tenure, is a stain on her record.

Autocrats around the world who use whataboutism to fend off criticism will take note of our nation's dysfunction.

ANTHONY ARNAUD
LAGUNA NIGUEL, CALIF.

TO THE EDITOR:

President Trump's firings of Pam Bondi and Kristi Noem from their cabinet positions are the latest examples of his limited support for anyone who signs on to his administration and pledges total loyalty.

Just like other loyalists who surrendered their principles and morals to the whims of the king, regardless of the law, ethics or their reputations, Ms. Bondi and Ms. Noem are now and forever badly tarnished. They may even face legal consequences for their actions while so unquestionably following the president's dictates.

Any officials who gamble their reputation and well-being by showing unyielding loyalty to President Trump, only to gain a limited time in power, have made a bad bet. But given the president's past conduct, they probably deserve what they get.

RICHARD GOETZ
MISSION VIEJO, CALIF.

TO THE EDITOR:

Pam Bondi has been an arrogant attorney general who has tried, mostly in vain, to prosecute President Trump's perceived enemies. But her failure to put the likes of Adam Schiff, Leitia James and James Comey in prison clearly infuriated the president.

The president has shown once again that loyalty means nothing to him. To his reader, the fact that Ms. Bondi is under a subpoena to appear before the House Oversight Committee to testify about the Jeffrey Epstein files was a

major factor in her removal. Re "Trump Fires Bondi After Bumpy Tenure" (front page, April 3):

While I am thrilled that Ms. Bondi has been fired, I am very wary of who her replacement might be.

HENRY A. LOWENSTEIN
NEW YORK

TO THE EDITOR:

I don't mean to defend Pam Bondi — ever — but it is clear that she was damned if she did release the Jeffrey Epstein files and damned if she didn't. Her successor will have similar problems handling this issue.

President Trump simply wants the whole Epstein issue to go away, and it never will now. The public knows too much, and its appetite for more information has been whetted.

Ultimately, the president won't be happy with anyone in the position of attorney general. It could just be a revolving door for the rest of his term, which would be fine by me.

REVA COOPER, BROOKLYN

A.I. and Therapy

TO THE EDITOR:

Re "Your Chatbot Is Not a Therapist," by Divya Saini and Nataasha Bailen (Opinion guest essay, April 2):

Clinicians are right to warn that A.I. chatbots can entrench reassurance-seeking and even reinforce delusional thinking. But focusing mainly on their risks misses why so many people are turning to them in the first place.

I have increasingly heard of patients turning to A.I. chatbots in my psychiatric practice. The demand for mental health care far exceeds the supply. Long wait lists, high costs and uneven access have made timely psychotherapy feel like a luxury rather than a basic component of health care. In that vacuum, it is hardly surprising that people seek out tools that are immediate, responsive and endlessly available.

Still, convenience should not be mistaken for care. Psychotherapy is not merely an offering of comfort or validation; it depends on a human relationship in which misunderstanding, tension and even frustration can become sources of insight. A clinician's capacity to recognize and reflect on relational patterns (including those that emerge in the therapeutic relationship itself) cannot be replicated by a system designed to agree and reassure.

A.I. may have a role as a supplement. But when it begins to replace human care, it risks deepening not only individual distress but also the very systemic failures that made it appealing in the first place.

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COLUMNIST | MICHELLE GOLDBERG

The President Has No Idea How to End His War

IN A FUNCTIONING American democracy, the president would deliver an Oval Office address at the start of a new military conflict. Donald Trump, however, decided to wait until a month into his war with Iran to give a speech about it to a skeptical public.

In the run-up to this address, experts speculated about what he was going to announce. A ground invasion? De-escalation? A petulant withdrawal from NATO because no one wants to help him open the Strait of Hormuz? It was none of these. Instead, a slurping Trump rebashed a bunch of his Truth Social posts, alternately boasting about America's military progress while threatening war crimes. His speech told us very little, at least explicitly, but revealed quite a lot.

First, he showed us that he has no plan to get out of the mess he created. One way to judge how the war is going is to look at which side is trying to wrap it up. On Wednesday, Axios reported that JD Vance has made overtures to Iran, via mediators, about a possible cease-fire. Iran, however, may not be willing to negotiate. American intelligence agencies, according to The New York Times, have assessed that "the Iranian government believes it is in a strong position in the war and does not have to accede to America's diplomatic demands."

Perhaps hoping to get Iran to the table, Trump on Wednesday repeated ultimatums he's already made. "Over the next two to three weeks, we're going to bring them back to the Stone Ages, where they belong," he said. Absent a deal, he threatened to destroy Iran's electric plants and, perhaps, its oil, which would be illegal under international law, not that the president cares.

By Thursday, American and Israeli strikes had already severely damaged the Pasteur Institute in Tehran, a major medical research center. Vali Nasr, an Iranian American political scientist and a former State Department adviser, saw the attack as part of Trump's promised campaign to destroy Iran as a modern society. As a child, Nasr recalled, he got his vaccinations at the Pasteur Institute. His grandfather, a doctor, worked there. It is, he told me, "the gold standard of international-level health care in Iran."

The bombing of the institute, he pointed out, comes just days after airstrikes on two pharmaceutical production facilities, which are particularly important to Iran, given how expensive foreign medicines have become, thanks to international sanctions. The United States and Israel may claim that these were dual-use facilities, but Iranians, said Nasr, sense that "this is no longer a war on the Islamic republic or its missiles or its nuclear facility. This is a war on the country. This is about turning Iran into a failed state."

That, in turn, strengthens the regime's hand domestically. Ali Vaez, the Iran project director at the International Crisis Group, pointed out that every night since the beginning of the war, the regime has been turning out its supporters in public squares throughout the country. "Those crowds are actually growing bigger and bigger," he said. Even Iranians who dislike their rulers have come to oppose the war "because of the damage to their infrastructure, because of the civilian casualties, because of the targeting of historic sites and Trump's rhetoric." Meanwhile, Iran's leaders can surely see



JASON HENSLBARY FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

that Trump's domestic position is weakening. The war has dragged his approval ratings close to career lows: 35 percent, in a recent YouGov/The Economist poll. That's not far from where George W. Bush was when he left office in disgrace amid a failed war and economic collapse. Most likely, one reason Trump gave his Oval Office speech in the first place was to try to convince Americans that his Iran adventure is going better than they think. For an inveterate liar, Trump can be surprisingly transparent about his motives, and on Wednesday afternoon he said, "Tonight I'm making a little speech at 9 o'clock, and basically I'm going

An outspent and outgunned Iran somehow has the upper hand.

to tell everybody how great I am."

His desperation is obvious. The speech, said Nasr, is a signal to Iran that "he's not doing really well with his own public and that he's under pressure." It's in Iran's interest to ratchet that pressure up, which is why Vaez believes that the regime currently has little interest in ending the war.

Trump does seem to want to end it, but he doesn't know how. We still don't know whether he'll send soldiers into Iran to try to score a decisive blow, whether he'll declare victory and leave or if he'll finally finagle some type of deal. All we know is that he has managed to give Iran the upper hand in this conflict while tanking the global economy and shredding America's most important alliances. Trump may not have pulled out of NATO on Wednesday, but European leaders understand that the pact is increasingly meaningless. "If you create doubt every day about your commitment, you hollow it out," President Emmanuel Macron of France told reporters on Thursday.

Think back to the rambling briefings Trump gave during the Covid pandemic, when he suggested injecting bleach, boasted about the "great job" he was doing and repeatedly promised that the virus would disappear naturally. It was a seaisack feeling, to realize our country was in a cascading crisis with a bumbling narcissist at the helm. "When this conflict is over, the Strait will open up naturally," Trump said Wednesday night of the Strait of Hormuz, which Iran is currently using to choke global energy supplies while increasing its own oil exports. "It will just open up naturally." Sounds familiar.



FINANCIAL TIMES

"Without fear and without favour"

ft.com/opinion

An inspiring new race to the Moon

Artemis II is reawakening interest in science and the thrill of human exploration

Four astronauts are spending this Easter weekend speeding into outer space at thousands of kilometres per hour. Their Artemis II flight around the far side of the Moon takes place in the context of intense geopolitical competition, with the US keen to achieve a new lunar landing before China gets there.

This mission is unlikely to arouse as much interest as its equivalent in the Apollo programme, which took astronauts around the Moon over Christmas in 1968 in preparation for Neil Armstrong's "giant leap for mankind" the following July.

audience with real-time audio and video coverage from Artemis II of a quality unimaginable in the Apollo era.

The fact that a dozen men walked on the Moon more than 50 years ago should not induce a feeling of "been there, done that", either today or if the Artemis IV mission lands as planned in 2028.

For the first few landings, the excitement will lie in arriving safely and exploring the lunar surface. Later, according to plans for the 2030s, Moon bases will be built for longer-term human habitation, including visits by wealthy tourists.

Earth, new international rules are urgently needed to ensure that activities such as construction and resource extraction can take place without aggressive competition for lunar land.

While geopolitical rivalry is the primary force driving the US and China to Moon missions, as it was during the Soviet-US space race in the 1960s, NASA is commendably more open to international collaboration today.

Planetary scientists look forward to big research dividends from future lunar expeditions. They will be able to investigate the Moon far more thoroughly than has been possible during the brief Apollo visits and subsequent uncrewed landings.

Nasa's PR machine will provide a receptive global audience with real-time audio and video coverage of a quality unimaginable in the Apollo era

almost pristine record of the solar system's past, preserving evidence of bombardment by meteorites over billions of years. Additionally, the lunar far side, permanently shielded from Earth's radio noise, is a perfect location for observing the distant universe.

Some scientists and astronomers argue that humanity will soon be able to do everything it wants on the Moon without the risk and cost of sending people there, using robots equipped with advanced AI.

We should see the Artemis missions partly as joyrides, in the best sense of the word. You don't have to be an American to say "Go Artemis!"

Opinion Society

Pilgrimage has journeyed to commercial boom



Chine McDonald

When Archbishop Sarah Mullally made the six-day pilgrimage from St Paul's Cathedral in London to her installation at Canterbury Cathedral last week, she was walking the pilgrim path her predecessor Thomas Becket had walked more than 850 years before her.

Last year, 1.67m pilgrims travelled to Mecca for Hajj – the most significant pilgrimage in Islam. While the biggest Hajj recorded was 3.16m in

out an inner journey." We're all – no matter our religious identity – seeking answers to existential angst and turbulent times. The BBC television show Pilgrimage sees celebrities come face to face with these truths.

Authentic pilgrimages often involve an element of endurance, of denial of self and body. Some are more gruelling than others. St Patrick's Purgatory in County Donegal involves three days of fasting, sleep deprivation and standing on sharpened rocks.

But the increase in popularity of gentler pilgrimages could signify yet another element of a consumer culture: modern spiritual practices operate with market logic. Pilgrimages become another option in a catalogue of wellness products, novelty travel, heritage walk packages and fandom.

So pilgrimage isn't merely a retreat from modernity but a way of navigating it. Rather than a revival of past habits, pilgrimages help us in the present. In a supposedly secular age, the ideas, rituals and practices of religious traditions aren't just concerned with the otherworldly, but the every-day stuff of being human, then as now.

And there may be something of the sacred and the secular found in any type of reverential journey, whether in the 14th or 21st century. But perhaps at their most basic level, those pilgrimages that still maintain some connection to spiritual tradition nevertheless answer today's needs.

It is no surprise, then, that the industry is booming. Modern-day pilgrims feel the draw of open space, connecting with nature, space for quiet reflection. Perhaps they feel a pull to disconnect from a world that feels increasingly frenetic. Pilgrimages have always offered refuge from the everyday. Now that means the delightful sound of the thud of walking boots on grass rather than the slow, numbing silence of the never-ending social media doomscroll.

The writer is director of the religion think-tank Theos

Letters

Nuclear proliferation is what happens when Man plays God

In "How the world learned to love the bomb" (Opinion, March 19), your columnist Janan Ganesh suggests that a "moral seal" has been broken by the increasing frankness with which governments now discuss the subject of nuclear proliferation.

This is compounded by the fact that, for the first time in over half a century, there is no binding agreement to limit nuclear stockpiles between the US and Russia, the New Start treaty of 2010,

which capped the number of operational missiles and warheads in the world's two largest nuclear arsenals having been allowed to expire in February ("Return of nuclear brinkmanship looms as arms control treaty expires", Report, February 4).

I would argue more fundamentally that such a seal was broken at the point when Man himself elected to harness this terrifying and ultimately terminal power for the purpose of

inflicting mass destruction and death. Catholic theology teaches that the "moral-sacred" branch of human reason has primacy over the "technical-scientific" branch. The former defines "what may be done", the latter "what can be done" – ie that the only standards and limits that can constrain science and technology are the current levels of Man's ability to develop it. In purely scientific-technical

terms, it is "progress" if Man is able to produce weapons that are increasingly powerful in their destructive power. It is only when a moral-sacred standard has primacy in terms of what Man ought to do, and "to what ends", that civilisation can safeguard the proper status of science and technology in human affairs, and prevent it from being Man's destruction. Craig RA Hesketh Manchester, UK

The refreshing equanimity of the death row lawyer

Before reading Edward Luce's Lunch with the FT article ("Hope is our superpower", Lunch with the FT, Life & Arts, FT Weekend, March 28) I had never heard of Bryan Stevenson, America's foremost death row lawyer, who has a museum named after him in Montgomery, Alabama.

A Harvard Law School graduate, like former president Barack Obama, Stevenson could have settled for "that holiday home in the Bahamas" as Luce puts it. But the greatest possession of the 66-year-old – he never quite got around to marrying and having a family of his own – is a piano, which sits in his front room.

I enjoy the FT's "Lunch with" profiles, and have gleefully tucked into many generously served over the years. This, however, is the best one I have ever sampled.

What struck me most was Luce's comment that not once during their conversation did Stevenson "raise his voice or betray bitterness". No Angry Black Man here, even if there is so much about his work to be truly angry about. Quite a feat.

The picture that emerges is that of a refreshingly cerebral man, kind to all ("I don't have much interest in creating a lot of language that is excluding"), selfless, and above all a beautiful soul. Let me give the FT's US national editor, the last word:

"It strikes me that I have been listening for more than two hours to a man who speaks kindly about others and believes we can all do better. It takes me some time to recover."

Anthony Ojola London SE1, UK

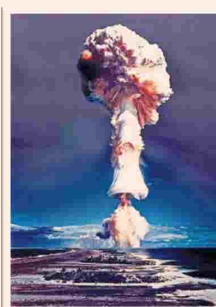
Why decapitation would reinstate moral hazard

Far from a bad thing ("The age of assassination", The Weekend Essay, March 28), the prospect of "decapitation strikes" in wartime should be welcomed because it reinstates the moral hazard otherwise absent from a system where leaders enjoy personal immunity for starting wars that send their own citizens to die.

If the offer is "kill our soldiers and citizens and we will kill yours", then there are, unfortunately, plenty of leaders in recent history who will take that deal. If the offer is "kill our soldiers and citizens and we will kill you", it becomes a much tougher decision.

Nothing focuses the mind quite like personal danger. We should celebrate the technology and intelligence that makes this possible, as it should reduce conflict to those genuinely morally necessary.

"Am I willing to die for this?" is a question every leader should have to ask themselves before putting their people in harm's way. Jonathan King New York, NY, US



Mushroom cloud of a nuclear bomb test explosion over the Mururoa atoll

Our future digital overlords will need pedants like me

I was dismayed to see consecutive editions of the FT Weekend opinion section start sentences with "hence why", which I view as a redundant Americanism, far below this paper's standards. Pedants like me have a more urgent mission than ever today: stamping out pet peeves and malapropisms from the training corpus for artificial general intelligence.

Editors' vigilance is the only way to ensure our future digital overlords don't say they "could care less" about human life; that we're irrelevant "for all intensive purposes" and so on.

With literacy plummeting across the west, it's urgent that sticklers are placed in positions of influence in tech and government, before human English is fossilised in perpetuity. Charlie Lasswell New York, NY, US

Plugholes and hurricanes

Emma Jacobs ("No BS: using business jargon is really giving you away", Opinion, March 28) dismisses Satya Nadella's plea "to get beyond the arguments of slop vs sophistication" in AI – mocking the Microsoft chief executive's words about "our 'theory of the mind' that accounts for humans being equipped with these new cognitive amplifier tools as we relate to each other".

However, he makes an important point. We do need to relate to each other and particularly now that "relating" will increasingly be mediated by AI in the form of a "cognitive amplifier" tool. Nadella will see that coming better than most of us.

Modern AI is evolving, and is to the old stuff what the swirl of a hurricane is to a plughole. Just as social media had impacts that regulators did not think through, so will AI intermediation. Pause for thought might serve best here. Christopher Roff Marsh Oxford, UK

Less of a stretch with the Alexander Technique

I have good news for your reporter Alex Bilmes ("The incredible shrinking man", Life & Arts, FT Weekend, March 28), whose poignant but humorous piece on height struck such a chord with my wife, she four-foot eleven-and-a-half inches, me five eleven-and-three-quarters.

The time of day is all, when measuring the human body. At night, our muscles relax, lengthen and widen. During the day, we do "stuff". That means our muscles tense and shorten. We shrink.

The "Alexander Technique", used by the Royal Ballet and many choirs and theatre companies, addresses this problem, teaching you how to lengthen and widen your muscles.

So Alex, do a bit of "Alexander" each day, measure yourself when you rise and get back that glow you lost when six foot proved an inch beyond you. Neil Riley Dorking, Surrey, UK

Two great film stars on beauty's imperfections

Rosemary Feitelberg's piece ("Fashion's anti-perfect backlash", Style, Life & Arts, March 28) piqued my interest.

A 25-year-old fashion designer tells your reporter that Gen Z consumers have "hit their limits" as far as the "anti-perfect backlash" goes. That made me smile.

The search for "constant perfection, the pristine new 'luxury' products and gorgeous models" has irked me for a long time.

Legendary film beauty (and underestimated intellectual) Marilyn Monroe has been quoted elsewhere as saying: "Imperfection is beauty. Madness is genius. And it's better to be absolutely ridiculous than absolutely boring."

My sense is that the call to imperfection is not a lowering of personal standards, to the extent of living in constant messiness and nonchalance. It is more about being authentic and no longer blaming external circumstances, such as the game of social media one-upmanship, for any personal discomfort.

Stripped of the excuse of not being perfect, we will have to show up –warts and all – and contribute our best effort to be worthwhile members of society. And if we can get our heads around that, we may well end up being better people than we thought possible. When questioned on the subject of perfection, another legendary screen beauty (and deep thinker) Audrey Hepburn is said to have tossed her head and said: "It's just a question of including an apostrophe and a little space and you can change 'imperfect' to 'I'm perfect.' Volia!" Ethne Kennedy CEO, Avenir Holdings Singapore

Grandmother foresaw the dangers of the space race

I wish the crew of Artemis II well.

My grandmother would have had her doubts about its wider mission, which NASA says paves the way for a moon landing in 2028 ("Nasa's first crewed Moon mission in 50 years set for blast-off", Report, April 1). She viewed the original Apollo landings as "wrong". Born Martha Webley in 1901, she was a kindly, mild-mannered member of the Church of England. Certainly no fanatic. "I have so loved the Moon all these years, and it is spoiled that thick people have been on it," she explained.

I would once have thought that naively romantic, but now realise that not only is it a charming and reasonable aesthetic judgment, it also points to the geopolitics, as relevant now as in 1969 when Neil Armstrong became the first man on the Moon.

Indeed, you report that NASA considers itself in competition with China. Martha was right. Moon boots on the ground are immediately followed by flags in the dust: both will make a mess. Nick Bradbury Reading, Berkshire, UK

The pickled peer

The (unintended?) irony of the choice of food metaphor for the headline on the letter about Henry Marc's Lunch with the hereditary peer Lord Mancroft ("A gentleman relished", March 21) is that the gentleman in question is not so much "relished" as "pickled", like a well-preserved specimen from an era which many would have wished "beyond" like the characters of Brideshead.

I also found it slightly shocking that someone writing from San Francisco, that redoubt of progressives, would pine for an England represented by those who inherited their money, manors – and manners – and their worship of dogs while carrying on their tailored-sleeves disdain for the rest of us who work and even create value.

Thankfully the FT does not yet record these lunches otherwise we might have had to listen to the old mangled English that comes from such plum-filled mouths. High Young Riehnhoff San Carlos, CA, US

Get in line Trump, Coolidge's coin was first

In his Long View column "The Trump coin and lessons from the Ostrogoths" (FT Weekend, March 28) Brendan Greeley writes of the new Trump commemorative coin that "it is a first to have a sitting president on an American coin".

This is not in fact the case. Calvin Coolidge shared a half-dollar with George Washington in 1926. O tempora. O mores. Robert Robinson London N1, UK

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Opinion

The case for Trump's tariffs looks strong a year on from 'liberation day'

AMERICA

Oren Cass



A year has passed since President Donald Trump appeared in the White House Rose Garden to announce sweeping tariffs on US imports. "Liberation day" marked a dramatic turning point for the international economic system and its seemingly inexorable march towards lower trade barriers and global integration. The results have been remarkable.

The past year has also proved as disruptive to the discipline of economics and the overconfidence of its most prominent practitioners as it has been to supply chains. The folly of tariffs was among their most deeply held beliefs,

hard-coded into their models, proudly professed in every interview. Tariffs, they insisted, would lead to sharply higher inflation and much slower growth, a likely recession and millions of jobs lost. They would prompt retaliation and lead to appreciation of the dollar, crippling exporters and leading to further deindustrialisation.

But none of this happened. The dollar weakened. Countries came to the table rather than retaliating and reached agreements favourable to the US. Inflation slowed, logging an increase in the price level of 2.4 per cent over the past 12 months, as compared to 2.8 per cent for the previous year. Real GDP growth accelerated, up an annualised 2.9 per cent over the last three quarters of 2025, as compared to 2.5 per cent in 2024.

Tellingly, the response from doomsayers has not been to admit error, but rather to argue that they would have expected strong economic performance given the president's many revisions to the tariff policy. The retroactive toler-

ance for robust protectionism underscores the extent to which the old orthodoxy has collapsed and the window for new thinking opened.

The manufacturing sector began to respond as well. Demand for capital equipment grew faster after "liberation day" than in 2024, and faster still over the past three months. Industrial output, which had declined over the past decade and fell 0.3 per cent in 2024, has posted a 1.6 per cent gain. Surveys of purchasing managers by the Institute for Supply Management and S&P Global have found increasing optimism among manufacturers. Anna Wong, chief US economist for Bloomberg, confirmed the overwhelmingly positive data last week, noting that it is "corroborated by a very strong signal from the latest earnings transcripts" and also that "tariffs probably played a role".

To deny that reality, opponents of tariffs have seized on the decline in manufacturing employment as the metric that matters and proof that the project

is failing. But they are doubly wrong: First, the trend has in fact improved. As compared to the sector's 167,000 jobs lost in the 11 months prior to "liberation day", losses in the comparable period since have been only 93,000.

Second, employment is a lagging indicator of re-industrialisation, a process that will take years. No one should

whether producers are proceeding with investment plans, not "where are the millions of jobs?"

Meanwhile, manufacturing job openings, which had been plummeting for several years, levelled off after "liberation day" and have since jumped higher, which is how a halt to the sector's slide and the green shoots of expansion would look. Add together manufacturing jobs and job openings, as a measure of potential employment, and the decline has slowed to less than one-eighth the rate in 2024, and turned to a gain over the past three months.

The importance of focusing on the early indicators in this first year also underscores the long journey ahead. The comical collapse of the anti-tariff case gives the strategy a chance to succeed – apparently President Bill Clinton was wrong when he declared, "protectionism is simply not an option because globalisation is irreversible". The US can choose another path.

But continuing down that path in year

two will require intensive focus on investment and workforce. Capital investment has held steady thus far, but it has not yet surged, and now it must. The Trump administration needs to provide a stable tariff regime and pursue permanent legislation so that producers can invest with confidence, and create an intelligible process for facilitating the enormous foreign investment commitments by Japan and Korea. It also needs to prime the talent pipeline for productive workers, with funding for the schools, unions and employers who can get that job done.

Economists often observe the real world and ask, "but does it work in theory, but failed in fact. On this first anniversary of "liberation day", the alternative is showing greater promise.

The writer is an FT contributing editor, chief economist at American Compass and writes the *Understanding America* newsletter

Tellingly, the response from doomsayers has not been to admit error

expect producers to respond to tariff announcements by going on a hiring spree. Nor is the workforce in place, after decades of neglect, to fill new positions quickly. At the one-year mark, the question is whether the costs and disruptions have been manageable, whether demand and output are up,



Evan White

What's going on with dollar debt?

FINANCE

Gillian Tett



Is the Iran war prompting some non-American governments to ditch dollar debt? That question has recently hovered over the markets, amid weak Treasury auctions – and a near-50 basis point jump in 10-year bond yields since the war started (albeit now slightly reversed).

And the FT has also revealed that non-US central banks have sold \$82bn worth of Treasuries since the war started, according to Federal Reserve custody data. That leaves their \$2.7tn holdings at the lowest level since 2012.

Of course, \$82bn is a piddling amount in the grander scheme of things. And those custody statistics slightly jar with the better-known Treasury International Capital (TIC) cross-border data. Moreover, central bank sales probably reflect a need to amass a defensive war chest in turbulent times, rather than anti-US sentiment. Some central banks, like the Polish one, are selling gold for that reason.

However, since this news comes amid reports that Iran is demanding payment for passage through the Strait of Hormuz in Chinese yuan or crypto – and trolling cartoons from China's state media mocking dollar dominance. So it is no surprise that central banks' sales have raised eyebrows. In febrile times, Fed custody data packs a punch.

However, there is a certain irony here. For while central banks grab the spotlight, they are not the only non-US players that matter. Far from it: hedge funds could prove even more important if the Iran war drags on – particularly those in the Cayman Islands.

Some striking research from the New York Federal Reserve explains why. This starts by noting that since 2018 leveraged hedge funds have dramatically increased Treasury holdings.

This reflects a boom in so-called basis trades (where funds exploit the gap between futures and cash prices). But the Bank for International Settlements says that hedge funds' "swap" trades (between Treasuries and other securities) have also recently exploded.

Thus by late 2025, hedge funds held \$2.4tn long Treasuries positions and \$1.6tn short positions – almost treble the level three years earlier, according to the Office for Financial Reporting. This is a sharp contrast to other non-US investors, like the Chinese government, which has slowed Treasury purchases so markedly that foreigners now own less than 30 per cent of all Treasuries, down from 46 per cent in 2008.

But what is even more notable is the opacity of these cross-border hedge fund flows. Official TIC data suggests

these are quite modest. However, Fed economists think TIC data is undercounting these flows by an eye-popping \$1.4tn.

Thus "the Cayman Islands [now] in fact the largest foreign holder of US Treasury securities – holding significantly more than China, Japan and the United Kingdom," Fed economists argue. Indeed between 2022 and 2024, hedge funds "absorbed 37 per cent of net issuance of notes and bonds", they say, noting this was "nearly the same amount as all other foreign investors combined". (original italics.)

And this affects more than Treasuries. The Bank of Japan recently also revealed an explosion in hedge fund purchases of Japanese government bonds. Surprisingly, this attracted scant attention.

Is this bad? Some hedges, like Ken Griffin of Citadel, argue not. And while this is self-serving, he has a point. Hedge fund demand for Treasuries, say, has previously softened the impact of Fed bond sales when it abandoned quantitative easing. It has also provided welcome liquidity at a time when big banks have reduced their traditional market-making activities. And the beauty of hedge fund trades is that these purchases are driven purely by financial calculations, not political bias – unlike some governments.

But therein lies the big danger too: if economic or financial fundamentals suddenly change in a way that makes these trades less compelling – say, via

Hedge funds dramatically increased Treasury holdings and their 'swap' trades have exploded

higher rates – many funds may all head for the exit, creating potential financial stability risks. That happened in March 2020, after the onset of Covid. So, too, in April 2025, with the so-called "liberation day" tariffs.

Could it happen again with the Iran war? One hopes not. Scott Bessent, US Treasury secretary, is determined to maintain market calm – and has hitherto done this, to an impressive degree, by using numerous tricks.

And while it seems that some crowded hedge fund trades were "flushed out" at the start of the Iran war that has (thankfully) not accelerated. Meanwhile, long-term asset owners – like insurance companies – show no significant desire to exit.

But will this relative calm continue if the Iran war drags on, raising inflation risks or (heaven forbid) creating more geopolitical shocks? We do not know.

The one thing that is crystal clear is that Bessent needs to roll over 33 per cent of US debt next year, equivalent to \$10tn in Treasury sales. So investors watching Iran should track the Cayman Islands too – and pray that Bessent's conjuring continues to work.

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Regime change in Iran is much harder than the US thinks

Covert action can help topple a leader but it rarely builds legitimacy

Jonny Gannon

The US and Israel have done significant damage to Iran's military and security apparatus. Senior commanders have been killed at a pace rarely seen in modern warfare. The regime's sense of impunity has been shaken. These are real achievements. But the Islamic republic remains what it has long been: a regime that is brutal at home and destabilising abroad.

Military success should not be confused with political transformation. That is the dilemma now confronting Washington and its regional allies: how to exploit battlefield gains without falling into the familiar illusion that pressure alone can produce regime change.

After 26 years in operations with the CIA, including helping lead sizeable covert action programmes, my experience tells me there is no silver bullet here – least of all in covert action.

The prospects for immediate political change in Tehran remain slim. As the scholar Karim Sadjadpour has observed, the Revolutionary Guard and military are seeking to ensure regime survival because it is in their economic interest. Even after military setbacks, the regime's core instruments of coercion remain intact enough to shape succession and survival.

America's Gulf partners, especially the UAE, have no interest in being left across the water from a wounded animal. A prolonged war would raise the costs sharply: repeated missile and drone threats, disruption to shipping and insurance through the Strait of Hormuz, pressure on investor confidence in Abu Dhabi and Dubai, and the latent risk of Iranian proxy or covert retaliation on Emirati soil.

The UAE's leaders know that when the sorties end and the headlines move on, they will still face the consequences. Their concern is not only whether the regime survives, but whether it survives angry, cornered, and even more dependent on asymmetric retaliation.

For our part, the US intelligence community will need to be vigilant and resourced sufficiently so as to deal with a return to a cold war with the Islamic republic that could involve lethal operations directed at American officials.

That is why the US should resist the temptation to move beyond President Donald Trump's stated aims, which could lead us to slide into an open-ended campaign for regime change. The danger is not merely mission creep. It is the risk of a truly regional war.

For more than a generation, some US policymakers have believed the Middle East could be fixed, reordered, or remade through force and political engineering. That conceit has failed repeatedly because it misunderstands how power actually works in the region.

That is particularly relevant when discussing alternatives to the current regime. There is no cohesive opposition prepared to take the reins. The Iranian diaspora is fractured. The Mujahideen-Khalq, or MEK – an exiled opposition group with controversial internal practices and little credibility inside Iran – is

Political culture cannot be redesigned from the air, and human nature cannot be remade in Washington

not a viable vehicle for legitimacy.

Reza Pahlavi, the son of Iran's last shah and the best-known monarchist figure in exile, remains the most recognisable opposition name abroad, and that should be acknowledged. He may yet emerge as a genuine champion of the Iranian people, but prominence is not the same as power and he does not yet command the loyalty of the security or military institutions that would determine any serious transition.

Washington should also avoid squandering whatever goodwill remains among ordinary Iranians who distinguish between their rulers and the outside world. In conducting military oper-

ations, the US takes tremendous care to minimise risk to civilians. That is why the investigation into the bombing of the school in Minab should be allowed to run its course. If it is ultimately determined that the US was responsible, Washington should acknowledge the mistake and apologise. That is both morally right and strategically wise.

History offers sobering lessons when it comes to covert action. It has in some cases contributed to regime change: the 1953 CIA-British coup in Iran that removed Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, and the 1954 US-backed overthrow of Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala. But those episodes also reveal the limits.

Covert action can help topple a leader. It rarely builds legitimacy, institutions or a durable political order. And the consequences – backlash, repression, instability or long-term anti-American grievance – can arrive years later.

The wiser course is strategic patience: continue for a time to degrade the regime's lethal capabilities, but dial down the bombing at the earliest opportunity so as not to harden civilian sentiment or squander goodwill. Above all, Washington should continue to consult closely with Gulf allies who will be left to manage the consequences long after the kinetic phase ends.

Iran may yet change. In fact, this is likely. But history suggests it is far easier for the US to weaken this regime than to shape what comes next.

The writer is a former CIA operative with deep exposure in the Middle East

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والخطايا غُستورة بالخطاي
كَمْ جميلٌ بهِ المساوي تُصانُ
(عمارة اليمنى)

YOUR DAILY ARABIC PROVERB

Wrongoing hides behind generosity. Many a beautiful soul guards his flaws through charm.

Umara Al-Yamani
(12th-century Yemeni historian, jurist and poet)

Opinion

Truce with Iran is not weakness but a strategic necessity

AFZAL KHAN



Afzal Khan is MP for Manchester Rushmore. He has been a Labour MP since 2017.

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The past month has tested the Middle East to breaking point. Following US-Israeli strikes on Iranian targets at the end of February, Tehran attacked Gulf infrastructure and disrupted shipping in the Strait of Hormuz. Oil prices have surged, global supply chains are strained, and households are feeling the squeeze at the petrol pump and on their energy bills. In such circumstances, the case for urgent de-escalation is overwhelming. Yet de-escalation must never mean disengagement. Britain's interests, our allies' security and the stability of the global economy demand a calibrated response that defends partners without being drawn into open war. UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer's decision not to commit British forces to direct offensive operations against Iran was not hesitation, but statecraft. The Labour government has acted with speed and purpose, deploying an additional Typhoon aircraft, helicopters and an air defence battery to protect Gulf partners in Bahrain, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. Royal Navy

assets have been positioned to try to keep the strait open. UK Foreign Secretary Yvette Cooper has visited the region, the Cobra emergency committee has met repeatedly to manage the domestic cost-of-living fallout, and the Ministry of Defense has convened urgent roundtables to accelerate the supply of counter-drone systems and integrated air defenses. These steps are modest in scale, but decisive in effect: They are protecting British bases, working to safeguard the 20 percent of world oil that passes through the Strait of Hormuz each day, and demonstrating to our partners in Europe and the region that Britain remains a reliable friend amid global instability. Such actions are not partisan improvisation. They are the latest chapter in a long historic relationship. British and Gulf forces have trained and operated together for decades, from the liberation of Kuwait in 1991 to the campaign against Daesh. Joint counter-terrorism and intelligence work has thwarted plots in London, Riyadh, Dubai, and Manama. The Gulf states have already shown

they will not wait passively for others to guarantee their security. They remain loyal to their traditional Western partners, yet recent events have left an understandable sense of disappointment in some Gulf capitals: a perception that US policy has, at critical moments, elevated Israel's immediate interests above the collective security and economic stability of the Gulf itself. This is precisely the moment for Britain to step forward as the dependable partner we have always been. The old rentier model, in which security was largely imported and oil rents funded everything else, is being quietly dismantled. Saudi Arabia is on track to meet half its defense needs from domestic production by 2030 and is already a serious manufacturer of land systems, autonomous platforms, and munitions. The UAE's Edge Group, Qatar's Barzan Holdings, Kuwait's growing defense investments, and Bahrain's integration into the Comprehensive Security Integration and Prosperity Agreement framework are all part of the same story: sovereign capability married to smart partnership.

These states have exercised remarkable restraint in the face of direct Iranian aggression. They are trying to keep the strait open and are focused on the long-term prize — diversified, knowledge-based economies that can deliver prosperity for their young populations. Britain and Iran have had political relations since the 13th century. The current geopolitical landscape of Iran, Russia, and China against the West is a modern configuration — but is by no means permanent. Instead of pushing Iran further to the East, Britain can rebuild political ties and bring Iran back into the fold. De-escalation has become imperative, but will only endure if it rests on credible deterrence and genuine regional ownership. By standing shoulder to shoulder with Gulf allies at a time when trust in other partnerships has been strained, by recognizing how profoundly their defense and economic strategies have evolved, and by insisting that any new diplomatic settlement includes every major player with a stake in Gulf security, Britain can help turn the present crisis into the foundation of a more stable order.

UK prime minister's decision not to commit British forces to direct offensive operations against Iran was not hesitation, but statecraft



COURTESY: MAJID FARHANGI/AL-JAZEERA

Instead of the alliance focusing on an ambitious agenda, it is time to focus on mending the transatlantic relationship

Deeper ties with Gulf states will strengthen NATO alliance

LUKE COFFEY



Luke Coffey is a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute. X: @LukeDCoffey

The war in Iran has resulted in no shortage of geopolitical consequences for policymakers around the globe. From high energy prices to key shipping lanes being closed, leaders from Europe to the Middle East to Australia are scrambling to mitigate the negative impact. However, another consequence beginning to gain attention as a result of the war in Iran is the breakdown in transatlantic relations. US President Donald Trump has repeatedly criticized the lack of willingness of Washington's NATO allies to dispatch a naval flotilla to reopen the Strait of Hormuz, and Secretary of State Marco Rubio has complained that some of America's European partners are restricting the use of air bases for operations against Iran. This breakdown in transatlantic relations comes at a difficult time for the alliance. We

are now inside the 100-day countdown to the next NATO summit in July, to be held in Ankara. Coincidentally, NATO has already been responsible for shooting down four Iranian missiles aimed at Türkiye, making the upcoming summit the first time the alliance has had to protect the airspace of a host nation. Clearly, it will not be business as usual. Any agenda that diplomats have been working on behind the scenes in the lead-up must now be set aside. Instead of the alliance focusing on an ambitious and robust agenda, it is time to lower expectations and focus on mending the transatlantic relationship. This is where it is fortuitous that the summit will be held in Türkiye. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has been able to use his leadership to bridge different parts of the alliance in recent years and has cultivated a good relationship with Trump,

which could work to the advantage of other European leaders. The summit will test Erdogan's statecraft in this regard. It is clear that the war in Iran is the main focus of the US and Trump. Even if the fighting were to stop tomorrow, the geopolitical consequences would be felt for months. Keeping this in mind, NATO should tailor the upcoming summit to address this reality. In addition to getting the US-European relationship back on track, there are two other policy areas that should be immediately obvious. NATO should seize the opportunity presented by again holding a summit in Türkiye, combined with the current geopolitical situation in the Gulf, to reinvigorate this initiative. Doing so would help bring NATO and the Gulf states closer together and make the alliance more relevant to Trump at a time when he is questioning NATO's value. There is also a broader geopolitical reality

to consider. Europe remains too important for the US economically for disengagement to be a viable option. A recent report by the US Chamber of Commerce found that 48 out of 50 states export more to Europe than to China, and that almost 60 percent of all foreign investment into the US comes from Europe, supporting millions of American jobs. Put simply, NATO serves as the primary security guarantor of America's largest export market, and placing this at risk is not in the country's interest. While transatlantic relations may seem strained today, the alliance has endured similar upheavals in the past and ultimately emerged stronger. As policymakers on both sides of the Atlantic scramble to assemble a workable agenda for the summit in light of developments in the Middle East, ambitions must be tempered. Realistic and achievable goals should be established, particularly in areas that matter to Trump.

Opinion

Grim anniversary in Sudan's 'forgotten' war

AREIQ ELHAG

Within days, Sudan will enter its fourth year of war, and the world is distracted again. Just as the Gaza war once stole international attention from Sudan and turned its conflict into a forgotten crisis before it slowly resurfaced, the same pattern is repeating itself today. The war on Iran has consumed Washington and Western capitals. And yet there are still those trying to keep the Sudan file alive.

In an effort to revive the issue, Massad Boulos, US senior adviser for Arab and African affairs, disclosed discussions he held with Jens Hanefeld, German ambassador to the US, about arrangements for the Third International Conference on Sudan, scheduled for Berlin on April 15, coinciding with the third anniversary of the war's outbreak.

Boulos confirmed in an online post that the meeting addressed the roles of the parties co-hosting the conference and ways to strengthen international coordination to ensure its success. This move carries weight given its timing, as the Sudan issue has slipped down the list of

international priorities amid the preoccupation with the Iranian crisis and its wide regional consequences.

From this angle, the Berlin conference can be read as an attempt to reinsert Sudan into the international agenda after months of declining diplomatic momentum.

Yet these efforts run into complex internal challenges from the start, reflecting the depth of Sudan's divisions and the absence of any consensus around a potential negotiating path.

Forces aligned with the government and the military announced their boycott of the conference, citing what they described as an imbalance in the participant lists in favor of the Sumoud civilian coalition at the expense of other political forces and figures.

The Rapid Support Forces and their self-declared government, on the other hand, welcomed the initiative — a move that reflects a political awareness of the importance of being present on international platforms as part of the battle for legitimacy.

More telling is that a conference of this level of international coordination is still met inside Sudan with widespread

Sudan needs a genuine national reconciliation built on an inclusive framework for a future that has room for everyone



Ariq Elhag is a journalist and researcher based in Washington.

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suspicion, sometimes framed as a "foreign conspiracy," when in reality it is at its core a political and humanitarian dialogue platform.

This reveals one of the most glaring paradoxes of the current Sudanese scene: International initiatives are rejected before they are even tested.

The Berlin conference thus becomes a test of whether Sudanese political forces can treat such initiatives as an opportunity to end the war rather than as another arena for political rivalry, and at the same time a test of the international community's seriousness in pushing the file forward again.

This is where Sudanese leaders face a responsibility they cannot avoid. Dialogue is not one option among many, it is the first and only path toward the peace that Sudanese people want.

Whatever the differences and competing calculations, sitting at the dialogue table and seizing every opportunity to bring positions closer together is the bare minimum required from any party that claims to be working in the country's interest.

But what matters even more than ending the war is what comes after it. Sudan needs more than a ceasefire. It needs a genuine

national reconciliation built on an inclusive and lasting framework for a future that has room for everyone, where no one is excluded and no legitimacy is built on the ruins of others.

This requires a collective vision for the post-war period, because the end of fighting will not mean the end of the crisis. Sudan's war was rooted in political exclusion, the absence of social justice, and the unequal distribution of wealth. Unless these underlying crises are addressed, any

peace agreement risks becoming the starting point for a new round of conflict under different names.

The problem was never the absence of initiatives or mediation efforts. It has always been the absence of willingness to accept a settlement.

As the crisis enters its fourth year, with the world preoccupied by other conflicts and crises, Sudan's file risks disappearing once again from the list of issues that receive meaningful international attention. And that absence, it seems, only creates more space for further killing, displacement, and looting of the country's wealth by actors who simply do not care about the fate of the Sudanese citizen.

Dialogue is not one option among many, it is the first and only path toward the peace that Sudanese people want

Public opinion in Turkiye is clear: Stay out of this war

DR. SINEM CENGİZ

For more than two decades, Turkiye has lived with wars on its doorstep — first Iraq, then Syria, and now Iran. None of these conflicts has remained within the countries' borders, and all have affected Turkiye's security, economy, and domestic politics.

Over time, Turkiye has adopted an increasingly proactive foreign policy in response to geopolitical transformations and the structural challenges posed by its neighborhood. With the country playing a greater role in regional issues, its population has also taken a growing interest in Ankara's foreign policy decisions.

Most Turkish people oppose the country being dragged into any war. If anything, they prefer Turkiye to act as a mediator. According to a recent public survey that asked what Turkiye's policy should be in the conflict between Iran and the US, most preferred neutrality or supported brokering peace. There is strong public opposition to US and Israeli military action, but that does not mean there is support for the Iranian regime.

Turkiye's position is delicate here because it is the only NATO member

that shares a long land border with Iran. That alone makes things more difficult for Ankara. On one hand, it is part of the Western alliance, while on the other, it risks facing the consequences of whatever happens next door. Historically, Turkiye's membership in NATO has shaped its policies not only with the West but also with its neighbors — a situation that calls for clear neutrality.

However, this neutrality is far from passive, because Turkiye cannot afford that. Rather, we currently see an active neutrality, where Turkiye is trying to be part of a peace framework — as seen in its cooperation with Pakistan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia — while also avoiding being drawn into the conflict by refusing to allow its territory and airspace to be used by the US in military operations against Iran.

Politically, Turkiye has not aligned with any of the parties in the Iran conflict. This is not the first time in Turkish political history that the country has taken such a stance. When the US launched its war against Iraq in 2003, most Turkish people opposed the conflict. This was one of the strongest anti-war public opinions in any NATO country at the time and was



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particularly striking given the alliance between Ankara and Washington. As a result, the Turkish parliament voted against allowing US troops to open a northern front from Turkish territory. Despite pressure from the US, Turkiye refused to become part of that war, with public opinion playing a crucial role in the decision. Turkiye has existed within the Western system while its public remains skeptical of the West.

In fact, the end of the Iraq war did not change Turkish public opposition to US policy in the region. If we look at public opinion now, the pattern is similar. Turkish people oppose the war even if it results in the fall of the Iranian regime, are skeptical of US intervention, and worried about what comes next. This shows a consistent public mindset in Turkiye that is shaped by four main dynamics: fear of regional spillover, distrust of US policies, popular anti-war sentiment, and economic and refugee-related concerns.

The Turkish public and political parties fear that further escalation of the war could make Turkiye a primary destination for refugees. During the 2010s, millions of Syrians fled to Turkiye, resulting in

economic, social, and security pressure on the country. A similar pattern happened during the Iraq conflict. Now with a similar situation in Iran, a country with a much larger population, the scale is likely to be greater. In addition, there are concerns over disruption to the fragile Kurdish peace process at home.

Traditionally, on foreign policy issues, the Turkish political spectrum is complex. There are several sentiments, including anti-Western or anti-imperialist discourse; Islamic, especially regarding issues such as Palestine; and pro-Western perspectives.

Turkish foreign policy has a long history of diplomacy under tense conditions. Ankara's current neutrality is not only the government's preferred position but also reflects the broader political spectrum and an increasingly influential public opinion.

Given Turkiye's NATO membership and its active role in regional politics, its neutrality should be understood within a broader perspective.

This stance is not passive, but is both a necessity driven by structural constraints and a product of domestic political and economic factors.

Historically, Turkiye's membership in NATO has shaped its policies not only with the West but also with its neighbors

Turkish people oppose the war even if it results in the fall of the regime, are worried about what comes next

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OPINION

The 'AI Detector' as Defamation Machine

By James Taranto

If it weren't for Pangram, I never would have heard of Mia Ballard. The young novelist "loves all things horror" and is passionate about writing stories focused on feminine rage. Horror isn't my cup of tea, and I do my best to steer clear of feminine rage. But last month Ms. Ballard was thrust from obscurity into notoriety when Hachette, her publisher, announced that it was canceling her book "Shy Girl" over accusations that it was generated by artificial intelligence.

Horror-novel fans had speculated online for months about the book's authorship, and in January Pangram CEO Max Spero stepped in to validate the chatter. But his evidence was itself authored by AI: Pangram's namesake product is an AI tool that purports to "detect AI-generated content with 99.98% accuracy." It classified 78.3% of Ms. Ballard's book as AI-generated, although if you dig into its analysis you will find that for many passages it indicates only "medium confidence" in that assessment.

Pangram said three of my writers produced 'AI-generated' articles. That didn't hold up. Was Mia Ballard railroaded too?

Ms. Ballard told a Journal reporter that she "did not personally use AI" while writing "Shy Girl," but an acquaintance she hired to edit the original, self-published edition did. "All I'm going to say," Ms. Ballard told the reporter, "is please do your research on editors before trusting them with your work."

Last week I learned that I too have been accused by Pangram, albeit indirectly, of publishing AI-generated content. In November the University of Maryland issued a preprint (meaning not peer-reviewed) academic paper alleging that three freelance op-ed pieces I accepted for these pages in 2025 were AI-generated. I looked into those charges and concluded that they are unsupported, that Pangram isn't reliable enough to serve as the basis for such accusations, and that there is a strong possibility Mia Ballard was railroaded.

Pangram pitches its tool to publishing and media organizations as a way to "protect editorial integrity." The company's website boasts that its product has been "reviewed as the most reliable and most accurate AI detection tool in the market by third parties including University of Maryland." But the Maryland study is more self-promotion than neutral review. Four of its seven authors are Pangram employees, including Mr. Spero and fellow co-

founder Bradley Emi.

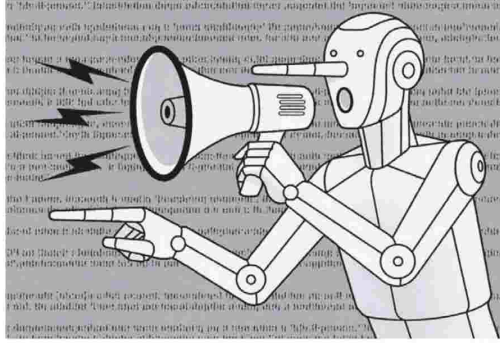
The Maryland researchers used Pangram to scan 251,442 newspaper articles, including 44,803 opinion pieces from the Journal, the New York Times and the Washington Post. They report that Pangram found opinion articles (which include editorials and letters to the editor as well as op-eds and columns) "are 6.4 times more likely to contain AI use than contemporaneous news articles from the same three newspapers."

The study includes a table that highlights 18 op-eds. Among them are three from the Journal that were supposedly AI-generated, written by military analyst John Spencer, civil-rights activist Edward Blum and physician Nicole Saphier. "There's way more than 3 individuals whose work was detected as mixed/AI in WSJ," lead author Jenna Russell, a doctoral student in computer science, told me in an email. Since these are the ones she and her co-authors chose to spotlight, they are the ones I investigated.

My first step was to run the articles through Pangram, whose website allows four free scans a day. To my surprise, the same tool applied to the same articles produced different results. Mr. Blum's piece came up 100% human; Mr. Spencer's, 44% AI and 56% human, which would make it "mixed," not "AI-generated." Only Dr. Saphier's article was still labeled 100% AI-generated. Complicating matters further, when I checked the researchers' database, it labeled the Blum and Saphier articles "mixed" and only the Spencer one "AI." To my mind, these wildly inconsistent results are enough to discredit any accusation based on a Pangram analysis.

Vaughni Vara reported in the Atlantic last week that a Washington Post editor conducted the same exercise with similar results. Pangram has updated its software since the study was conducted, according to Ms. Vara. Mr. Spero told her, in her paraphrase, that "the current iteration of Pangram... was designed to be more conservative... in flagging material as AI-generated, partly for fear of spreading false accusations." Even so, "when he and Russell reran their data set of opinion articles through the current version, the underlying assessments were similar to those in the earlier iteration."

This raises more questions than it answers. What exactly is meant by "the underlying assessments"? How can they be "similar" when the results for the articles the study spotlighted are materially different? If various "iterations" of Pangram produce such divergent results, why should anyone have confidence in the tool's reliability? I posed these questions in an email to Ms. Russell and Mr. Spero. Both



declined to answer. They didn't reply when I asked for an explanation of the discrepancies between the paper and the online database.

Next, I emailed the accused op-ed authors to ask whether and how they use AI in drafting their articles. Mr. Spencer said he doesn't use it at all, although he did circulate his draft among "a group of trusted friends, who I consider better writers than me."

Mr. Blum said he uses ChatGPT and Claude in a limited way: He pastes in drafts with the prompt "edit for grammar, usage and clarity." "Mostly, they hyphenate 'civil rights,' which I don't; use dashes instead of semicolons (I prefer semicolons); and shorten my longer sentences." He said he doesn't paste text from the chatbot back into his draft but decides for himself which of its suggestions to incorporate.

Dr. Saphier said that "I always free write [articles] in a Word document, then sometimes I have copy/pasted them into an AI with the prompt 'check for grammar, spelling, accuracy of statements and provide any flow suggestions.'" Unlike Mr. Blum, she has also sometimes pasted AI output back into a draft. She added that "I have stayed away from AI altogether in writing lately to avoid this exact scenario."

It is inaccurate and unfair to characterize work produced in the manner described by any of these authors as "AI-generated." The Pangram tool has no ability to discern a writer's work process. It merely looks for linguistic patterns that tend to correlate with AI output. Pangram boasts that its tool is far better than other AI detectors at distinguishing human from AI text. That may be true, but the bar is low. ZeroGPT, another popular detector, flags 96.4% of the Gettysburg Address as AI-written. Lincoln gets credit only for "We are met on a great battle-field of that war."

Pangram claims a false-positive rate of 1 in 10,000 for all forms of

writing and 1 in 100,000 for news articles, based on a test of content published before ChatGPT's 2022 debut. But neither the company's website nor the Maryland paper cites a false-positive rate for op-eds. My long experience with op-eds leads me to think that they may be more prone to false positives than other forms of writing. A significant subset of them are formulaic in style—expository, structured, smooth, coherent and impersonal, traits that overlap with AI-generated prose.

I asked Mr. Spero and Ms. Russell if their research tested for this possibility. He said "no op-eds from before the release of ChatGPT were flagged as AI-generated." She added that the sample size for the pre-AI op-ed test was 4,344 articles. As a matter of simple arithmetic, that is far too small a sample to rule out my hypothesis if we take Pangram's other claims at face value.

Those of us who practice writing as a professional craft have an ethical duty, and sometimes a contractual obligation, to ensure that our work is original. Many amateurs also adopt that ethos. To accuse them falsely of passing AI-generated work as their own is potentially defamatory. If the sole factual basis for such a claim is the output of a fallible and inconsistent AI-based pattern-detection tool that sometimes reports only "medium confidence" in its own findings, that looks like reckless disregard for the truth—especially when the accuser is the software's designer, who presumably knows its limits.

Which leads to another question about the Maryland study: Did its authors contact Mr. Spencer, Mr. Blum and Dr. Saphier and offer them an opportunity to respond before publishing the paper accusing them? This is basic journalistic due diligence. All three writers said they received no such communication. Both Mr. Spero and Ms. Russell declined to answer the question. He said only that "Jenna contacted ten reporters to ask

about AI use. She received no response from any of them." She disputed the question's premise. "We do not accuse anyone of using AI, rather we report trends at an aggregate level," she wrote. "We do not in any way say that using AI is inherently good or bad!"

A look at Ms. Russell's and Mr. Spero's Twitter feeds belies that nonjudgmental pose even more glaringly than their study does. On Feb. 16, Mr. Spero taunted a staffer for a British newspaper, whose name I will withhold: "We fetched 871 articles published in the Guardian by [the journalist] over the last six years. It's clear that he is increasingly relying on AI. In two weeks in February he churned out nine articles classified by Pangram as fully AI-generated. Receipts below!"

On Feb. 18, Ms. Russell replied: "Reminder that you can search over 250k news articles for AI slop at..." followed by the URL of the Maryland study's database. (An editor of Semafor answered Mr. Spero's tweet by quoting a Guardian spokesman, who described the accused man as "an exemplary journalist" and the Pangram CEO's accusation as "preposterous.")

I am in a position to defend my writers and myself, but Pangram has shredded the reputation of Mia Ballard, whose book was supposed to be published next Tuesday. The Times reported last month that she is "pursuing legal action," and her prospects in a contract dispute depend on facts that haven't been publicly disclosed. We don't know the terms of her agreement with Hachette or how her acquaintance used AI to edit her manuscript, and the company's AI policy permits authors to use AI for "editing, correcting or otherwise refining text or other content."

If the accusations against her are false, she could also have a claim against her accusers for defamation and tortious interference. And for copyright violation. The Pangram analysis of "Shy Girl," which Mr. Spero has made publicly available on his company's website, features the text "one of the few places you can still read it after Hachette's cancellation. Where did Mr. Spero get the text? Audrey Henson, who writes the Drey Dossier newsletter on Substack, noticed that "a URL was embedded directly in the document over and over: OceanofPDF.com." The Authors Guild describes OceanofPDF.com as "one of the most notorious digital ebook piracy sites."

Potential clients might ask: Exactly what does Pangram mean when it promises to "protect editorial integrity"?

Mr. Taranto is the Journal's editorial features editor.

Even Southern States Should Worry About Migration to Florida



CROSS COUNTRY By William Mattox

At first blush, there's little reason for state legislators in Mississippi and Georgia to care about James Quigley's cross-country move with his family to Florida from Washington state. But legislators in Jackson and Atlanta, and other capitals, may want to ask themselves: Are there education-minded families here who would move to Florida for better K-12 options, as the Quigleys did?

For Mr. Quigley, the breaking point was when his teenage son told him he planned to skip school often during his senior year, knowing he'd graduate regardless. When the tech industry executive met with his son's guidance counselor, the school confirmed that it rarely withheld diplomas from chronically absent pupils, lest these students suffer later in life.

Incredulous, Mr. Quigley removed his children from the public schools. Soon thereafter, he and his wife began a multistate search for a better learning environment.

The Quigleys fell in love with southern Georgia, but the schooling options there paled in comparison with what they found across the border in Florida. A crucial factor: robust school-choice scholarship programs that give parents control of how their children's per pupil dollars are spent.

"We couldn't believe Florida's school-choice programs," Mr. Quigley said. "They seemed too good to be true." Two years later, the Quigleys are reveling in the Sunshine State's education freedom.

One of their three school-age children is enrolled in a program designed for special-needs students. Another spends her time learning at home, with the help of a tutor, all paid for with scholarship money. And the third divides his time between learning at home and taking classes at the local public school, where he plays on the football team.

If the Quigleys' story sounds remarkable, it isn't—at least not in Florida. For the past five years, the Sunshine State has welcomed a stream of education-minded families who, thanks to the rise of remote work, can now move and live anywhere. During the pandemic, many of these "digital nomads" sought out Florida because it was

one of the few states that reopened schools quickly.

The stream of education-minded newcomers didn't stop with the end of Covid. Many Florida private

School choice attracted the Quigley family, who were otherwise inclined to move to Georgia.

schools have reported increases in new students coming from other states in recent years. More than 500,000 Florida students now par-

ticipate in a scholarship program, and 53% of the K-12 student population in Florida in the 2024-25 school year attended something other than their zoned public school.

The rise of school choice in the Sunshine State has changed the way Florida markets itself. Chamber of Commerce groups once relied exclusively on appeals to business leaders. Now, some outreach efforts focus on showing families the K-12 scholarship opportunities.

In recent months, the Florida-based organization for which I work has posted billboards in Georgia and Mississippi inviting folks interested in education freedom to "Join

Us." Next month, we will send postcards to selected neighborhoods in Virginia with a similar message.

We hope leaders in other states will join Florida in adopting robust school-choice scholarship programs. But if legislators elsewhere fail to act, Florida will invite their education-minded families to join us in the Sunshine State.

Florida is here for families who, like the Quigleys, highly value education opportunities. To the rest of the nation we say, "Join Us."

Mr. Mattox is senior director of the Marshall Center for Education Freedom at the James Madison Institute in Tallahassee, Fla.

The Democrats' ObamaCare Quagmire

By Chris Jacobs

One has to admire Democrats' chutzpah. In a recent letter, Ron Wyden, ranking Democrat on the Senate Finance Committee, and 11 of his Democratic colleagues outlined a series of healthcare principles, so the Senate is ready "to take action on these issues the next time Democrats are governing." The letter amounts to a simultaneous admission of ObamaCare's failures and promise to go even further the next time Democrats have power.

To "make health care simpler for families," the lawmakers would "make sure people can get the insurance they are eligible for through a one-stop shop," and "simplify and standardize plans and benefits." ObamaCare already created government-run exchanges to shop for coverage—years after private companies had created comparison-shopping tools online. The law also standard-

ized benefits, imposing new coverage requirements that more than doubled individual insurance premiums in ObamaCare's first four years. Why are Democrats suggesting policies they enacted in 2010?

The letter's vow to "get rid of junk insurance plans" hints at the senators' true motivation. Democratic lawmakers appear to want to regulate ObamaCare off-ramp like short-term limited-duration plans and catastrophic insurance out of existence. Much as the East German government created the Berlin Wall—officially known as the Anti-Fascist Protection Rampart—to "protect" people by preventing them from leaving, Democrats want to enact stronger so-called consumer protections that eliminate any exit from the ObamaCare morass.

To "take on corporate greed," the lawmakers want to "eliminate Big Insurance gaming of the medical loss ratio that hides their profits, and ensure

that those dollars are spent on providing care and lowering costs." Democrats are pledging to fix a problem they created as part of ObamaCare. As Sen. Elizabeth Warren outlined in November 2023, insurers have bought up

Their solution to the law's disastrous effects is simply more of the same.

pharmaceutical benefit managers and other healthcare entities to shift revenue from insurance products—where ObamaCare's medical loss ratio caps their profits—to business areas where profits remain uncapped.

In 2008, Barack Obama pledged that his healthcare plan would lower premiums by \$2,500 a year for the typical family. But Sen. Peter Welch, who signed the Wyden letter, conceded last fall that "we did fail to

bring down the cost of healthcare." The "solutions" the letter outlines would also fail to bring down costs. The senators propose reinstating costly enhanced subsidies that, before their expiration in January, encouraged fraudulent enrollment in exchange coverage. They also propose exploring the benefits of "giving all Americans access to Medicare-type choices for health care"—even though 94% of Medicare beneficiaries have some form of supplemental insurance to protect them from that program's high costs.

After 16 years of seeing the failure of government-supervised healthcare in action, Democrats still want to convince voters that more spending, regulation, and government control will somehow solve the problems created by just those things.

Mr. Jacobs is founder and CEO of Juniper Research Group, a policy consulting firm.

OPINION

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

The North Korea Lesson for Iran

President Trump decided to use military force to stop Iran from getting a nuclear weapon after diplomacy failed. This was a choice, as critics are quick to note, and a risky one. But the strangely forgotten U.S. experience with North Korea suggests the alternatives were even riskier.

That history is worth recounting today to show the limits of nuclear diplomacy with a determined foe, as well as what happens when the U.S. puts conflict-avoidance above all else.

In 1984 the CIA warned that North Korea could pursue weapons-grade plutonium. Under global pressure, dictator Kim Il Sung joined the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) the next year. This was seen as a sign of Pyongyang's peaceful intent, even as it delayed adopting nuclear safeguards.

North Korea continued to advance its nuclear program. In 1993 it denied inspectors access to camouflaged nuclear sites, leaving the world to guess whether it had separated plutonium for bombs. Facing tough questions, Pyongyang announced it would withdraw from the NPT.

The Clinton Administration was able to talk Kim down for a time, but Pyongyang quarreled with the International Atomic Energy Agency and in 1994 unloaded spent fuel rods from its Yongbyon reactor without IAEA monitoring. Would the fuel next be reprocessed to produce bomb-grade plutonium? No one knew.

Bill Clinton threatened sanctions. The U.S. military drew up plans for strikes on nuclear installations, and Defense Secretary Bill Perry presented a plan for a large military buildup in the region. Mr. Clinton canceled talks and deployed Patriot missile-defense systems to South Korea. John McCain backed the use of force from the Senate, and the White House was trending toward military options.

Enter Jimmy Carter. The former President informed the Clinton Administration that he intended to take up a prior offer from the North Koreans to visit and try to defuse the situation. Mr. Clinton decided to let Carter proceed as a private citizen, thinking it might give Kim a chance to back down. Instead Mr. Clinton found himself cornered politically.

Carter feared conflict above all and even opposed sanctions. He went beyond what he had been authorized by Mr. Clinton to discuss and announced a tentative agreement with Kim—on CNN. The press and foreign-policy establishment hailed nuclear peace in our time.

Military options came off the table and Mr. Clinton embraced the deal, which became the 1994 Agreed Framework. North Korea consented to freeze its illicit nuclear work and eventually allow full inspections in exchange for a multibillion-dollar package of civilian nuclear power and oil. The U.S. set aside the question of whether North

Korea had a bomb's worth of plutonium and ignored its NPT violations. The regime would melt over time with economic engagement, some said. Besides, who wanted another Korean war?

For a time the deal seemed to work. Yet in 1996 rogue Pakistani nuclear scientist A.Q. Khan visited Pyongyang to help with uranium enrichment, an alternative path to a bomb that North Korea pursued covertly. Weaponization research continued on the sly. The regime's intent to build a bomb never changed.

In 2002 the George W. Bush Administration confronted North Korea over its enrichment program, and Pyongyang reneged on the Agreed Framework. Kim Jong Il, the son of Kim Il Sung, expelled inspectors, withdrew from the NPT and resumed plutonium work. Mr. Bush employed threats, sanctions and diplomacy but ultimately ruled out the use of force. North Korea quadrupled its plutonium stockpile and in 2006 conducted its first nuclear test.

After that, U.S. military options became riskier. North Korea pressed on. It is now believed to possess some 50 warheads, and it tests ICBMs that will one day be able to reach the continental U.S. The latest missile test came Sunday.

The lesson is that U.S. Presidents waited too long to stop North Korea. The risks of war were always said to be too high, it was never a good time, and there was always another diplomatic option to exhaust. North Korea is now a nuclear power, which means it could escalate to devastating effect in any conflict.

This is more or less the path at least four Presidents took with Iran. Talks, deals, and economic relief were in ample evidence, with sanctions used as a negotiating tactic but without a credible threat of force. Like Pyongyang, Tehran agreed to a deal that didn't require it to come clean about past nuclear activities and left nuclear infrastructure intact for the future. Iran's regime never stopped pursuing the bomb.

Donald Trump is the only President who had the courage to attack Iran's nuclear program and allow Israel to do so, in June's 12-day war. The Iranian missile arsenal he now acts to degrade has its parallel in North Korea's artillery, which deterred U.S. action against Pyongyang's nuclear program by aiming at Seoul.

Also on the U.S. target list are Iran's buried stockpiles of fissile material and its construction site beneath Pickaxe Mountain, where it later hopes to enrich the material. The former perhaps can be watched, but it would be a mistake to end the war with the latter intact.

We don't know how the current Iran conflict will end, but we do know Iran's radical regime will not have a nuclear program when it's over. This has made the world a safer place.

Diplomacy failed to stop Pyongyang from getting the bomb. Trump didn't make the same mistake.

Paring the Government Payroll

Friday's labor report for March showed a healthy gain of 178,000 net new jobs, a welcome contrast to February's 133,000 decline. The data have been choppy month to month, but the increase suggests a decent labor market as the economy absorbs the oil-price shock from the Iran war.

Federal jobs have fallen by nearly 12% since the start of Trump II.

One especially welcome trend in the report is the continuing decline in federal government employment. The feds cut another 18,000 jobs in March. Federal hiring peaked in October 2024 at 3.013 million workers and was 3.01 million when President Trump took office for a second time in January 2025. Since then the feds have shed 352,000 jobs or about 11.7%—to 2.658 million in March.

No one likes to see anyone lose a job, but it's clear the government workforce has been bloated and needs to shrink. The federal payroll

climbed by 126,000 during the Biden Administration. Most federal roles don't create wealth. Providing security aside, most are focused on redistributing income or telling Americans what they can or cannot do.

The Labor Department hasn't broken out where the federal job cuts have taken place. But anecdotal evidence suggests they've been across most of the government, with the main exceptions being in the immigration and law enforcement and security agencies.

The striking political fact is how little these workers have been missed by the public. No doubt these employees believed they were doing useful work, but there has been little to no outcry about a decline in services. The size of government continues to rise owing to welfare and entitlement payments. But at least the payroll is being pared.

The ObamaCare Crisis That Isn't

Remember when Democrats claimed that Congress's failure to extend the pandemic ObamaCare subsidies would cause masses of Americans to lose insurance and premiums to skyrocket? It hasn't happened, as new data from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) show.

The large coverage losses and premium hikes haven't happened.

Some 23.1 million consumers signed up during this year's open-enrollment period. That's 1.2 million fewer than last year, but still 6.8 million more than in 2023 and nearly twice as many as in 2021. Many who dropped out of ObamaCare had previously been improperly enrolled or received subsidies they didn't qualify for.

CMS says it cancelled subsidies for "nearly 1.5 million people found to be ineligible"—mainly because they were concurrently enrolled in Medicaid or hadn't submitted income records for previous years—or had been enrolled in plans without their consent.

There are probably even more people still receiving subsidies that they shouldn't be getting since courts have blocked some CMS regulations to verify eligibility. Most of the Republican 2025 tax bill's anti-fraud provisions also haven't kicked in. The pandemic-era subsidies encouraged people to understate income to

qualify for bigger subsidies, and many may still be doing so.

Regardless, the average monthly premium payment for all consumers who sign up on the federal exchange is \$137. That's up from \$85 last year, but lower than in 2021 (\$143). For the 90% or so of consumers receiving subsidies, the average monthly payment is \$73, which is about the same as it was in 2022 (\$77) with the pandemic fillip. Hardly a great hardship reduction.

Notably, the biggest cost increases have been in the 20 or so mostly Democratic-controlled states that run their own insurance exchanges. Premium payments in these states are more than double that in the rest of the country and jumped to \$266 a month on average from \$179 last year. Most Democratic states impose additional costly rules on plans—for instance, mandating that insurers cover gender-affirming care and in vitro fertilization.

The CMS report shows that the biggest beneficiaries of the pandemic subsidies were Democratic states. That's why Democrats were so insistent on extending them. Maybe they should fix their misconceived policies that raise healthcare premiums rather than demanding that taxpayers nationwide throw more subsidies at them.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Birthright Citizenship and the Constitution

I read with great interest Randy E. Barnett's op-ed "Trump Is Right on Birthright Citizenship" (April 1). The 14th Amendment's phrase "subject to the jurisdiction thereof" is the functional equivalent of the Second Amendment's phrase "a well-regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free state." The Supreme Court justices will now discuss the language and issue a decision.

Whatever one thinks about the Supreme Court and the language of the 14th Amendment, there can be no real doubt that birthright citizenship is widely abused, a 19th-century concept that is greatly harming 21st-century America. Does anyone truly believe that Chinese birth tourism to Guam is what the Founders intended?

I hope that the Supreme Court will rule against birthright citizenship, but if it doesn't, this isn't the final word. The Constitution can and should, in the appropriate circumstances, be amended, and this is certainly such an instance. Regrettably, America is so divided that the difficult process of amending the Constitution is a nonstarter.

MICHAEL G. BRAUTIGAM
Tallinn, Estonia

In discussing the 14th Amendment, Mr. Barnett fairly shows that the phrase "subject to the jurisdiction thereof" isn't empty surplusage. However, one can't help but wonder

how its public meaning in 1868 (when the amendment was ratified) excludes children born to unlawful or temporary residents, or how legislative remarks about diplomats and tribal allegiance map neatly onto modern immigration categories.

As the late Justice Antonin Scalia stressed, legislative floor explanations are weak evidence for the core originalist question: How would a contemporary informed reader interpret the words as enacted?

It seems plainly logical that diplomats, tribal members and invading armies are of a distinct sovereignty and not "subject to the jurisdiction" of the U.S. Likewise, a visa overstay isn't a foreign mission.

VIKRANT SHARMA
Portland, Ore.

Even if Mr. Barnett's argument is correct, President Trump's executive order on birthright citizenship would still be unlawful. Mr. Trump has no power to change the rules of naturalization via executive order. Article I, Section 8, Clause 4 of the Constitution says it is Congress that has the power to "establish a uniform Rule of Naturalization." If Mr. Trump is correct about the Citizenship Clause's original meaning, he has still usurped Congress's prerogative. It's Liberation Day all over again.

JACOB LINKER
New York

Speed Bumps on the Road to Self-Driving Cars

Tim Higgins is right that the momentum behind autonomous vehicles (AVs) feels different this time ("Self-Driving Cars' Hype Feels Real," Business & Finance, March 24). But calling logistics "boring" understates the real barrier to scale. The readiness of charging hubs—where vehicles are powered, cleaned, maintained and inspected—is what will determine how fast this industry grows.

The last AV cycle didn't stall because the technology failed or capital dried up. It stalled because scaling required solving harder, real-world problems. Now that the software is ready, the bottlenecks are land, power and permitting. Getting those three aligned makes developing self-driving technology look easy by comparison.

Robotaxis aren't cars with better software. They are high-utilization electric fleet vehicles that depend on centralized, megawatt-scale charging hubs. These sites must be located

correctly, approved by multiple agencies and connected to a grid already under strain. No matter how quickly operators expand service areas or how fast new vehicles roll off the line, the infrastructure behind autonomy cannot be built overnight.

The question isn't whether robotaxis can scale as a business. It's whether infrastructure can be developed fast enough to keep up. Vehicles can be produced in months; site development can take years.

If we want autonomous mobility to deliver on its promise—affordable, reliable, emissions-free transportation—we need coordinated planning among technology companies, utilities, regulators and cities. Treat charging like infrastructure—planned, permitted and powered—ahead of demand, and this time really can be different.

BRETT HAUSER
Chief executive, Volterra
Los Angeles

The Blue State Exodus Enriches Red States

Your editorial "The High-Tax Wealth Flight Continues" (Review & Outlook, March 28) correctly puts a spotlight on the income transfer from blue states to red states between 2022 and 2023.

But the data from that period only tell a sliver of the story because they reflect migration over a short time. At Unleash Prosperity, we've examined the cumulative change in net income from Internal Revenue Service data from the years 2012-23. These data quantify the massive wealth transfer from high-tax to low-tax states due to interstate migration.

Florida gained a net \$1 trillion increase in income from new entrants minus those who left. Texas was runner up with a nearly \$300 billion cumulative income gain. Neither state imposes an income tax.

Meanwhile, two of the highest income tax states, California and New York, lost more than \$500 billion and

nearly \$400 billion respectively over the same period. These losses keep accumulating year after year because the migration is almost all in one direction. The low-tax states are plundering the tax base of the high-tax states.

Over the past few decades, I've debated many of the most leftist economists in the country, and they consistently don't have a good answer to this question: If blue states' high-tax policies create a worker's paradise, why is everyone leaving?

STEPHEN MOORE
Potomac, Md.

Tiger Woods and the Case For Personal Responsibility

Regarding "The Tragic Tale of Tiger Woods" (Upward Mobility, April 1): While I appreciate Jason L. Riley's column, I don't share his forgiving esteem for Tiger Woods.

The golfer was recently arrested for allegedly driving under the influence (he pleaded not guilty), and this is not his first such incident. He was arrested in 2017 for DUI before later pleading guilty to reckless driving.

Mr. Woods has the wherewithal to protect the public and himself from harm by calling a cab or an Uber or hiring a full-time driver. Celebrities who behave recklessly don't deserve our respect.

LARRY GREENBERG
Skokie, Ill.

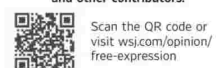
The High Cost of Moonshots

Regarding your editorial "NASA Heads Back to the Moon" (Review & Outlook, April 2): Billions were spent on this project. Would that money be better spent on cancer research and helping veterans? I think it would.

CHARLES J. MORGAN
Pittston, Pa.

Free Expression From WSJ Opinion

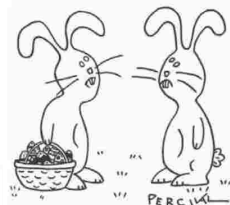
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Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



"I keep them all in one basket to control the supply chain."

OPINION

A Republic, Not a Mood



DECLARATIONS
By Peggy Noonan

In his Iran speech Wednesday, President Trump asserted much and argued for little. There were some boasts, some threats—"We are going to hit them extremely hard. . . . We're going to bring them back to the stone ages, where they belong." And some of what appeared to be magical thinking: "When this conflict is over, the Strait will open up naturally."

The presidency has become too dependent on the ego and temperament of the man in office.

The central message seemed to be that the war isn't over but may be over in a while, the U.S. will continue bombing for two or three weeks, and, unstated but made clear through subject matter, setting, symbolism and the length, extent and success of the military campaign: Of course this is a war.

It was strange that Mr. Trump didn't prepare the country for any possible repercussions. A somber admission that U.S. actions in Iran might be followed by serious counteraggression was needed, and is part of the president's responsibility.

I was thinking this week that Mr. Trump's vision of himself as primarily a dealmaker is unsuited to a necessity of presidential leadership, which involves laying out the logic of a difficult case. Deal makers gain advantage through strategies that don't necessarily involve transparency and forthrightness. I went back to Mr. Trump's 1987 "The Art of the Deal." A strong undercurrent of that lively book is that it's good to be unreadable and sneaky: "I play it very

loose." "Sometimes it pays to be a little wild." "The truth is I'm keeping my options open." "I also protect myself by being flexible. I never get too attached to one deal or one approach." "I keep a lot of balls in the air." "Once I've made a deal, I always come up with at least a half dozen approaches to making it work because anything can happen." Money is a way of keeping score. "The real excitement is playing the game."

I want to swerve here to talk about the word that keeps coming to mind when I look at the president's leadership, and it is "mood." A lot seems to depend on matters of personal choice, will and mood. In Iran for instance, maybe he'll bomb the rubble until it jumps, maybe he'll declare victory and withdraw by May, maybe he'll send in troops. But it will be his choice, no consultation needed with that pesky branch, the legislative.

There is something not at all right when the weightiest decisions of a democratic republic depend so much on the mood of one man. With the great majority of past presidents personal mood didn't have such precedence. There were forms and traditions and processes, there were strictures, rules, the law, expectations, all of which would hem in the head of the executive branch, at least eventually. The president's mood didn't reign and determine everything. But now mood mows down all. People have become habituated to this, tolerate it, factor it in. But of course when you factor it in. But of course when you factor it in. But of course when you factor it in.

Fear of the president's mood has reduced otherwise impressive appointees to anxious ferrets sparring with Sunday news show anchors in a way that is performatively smug but also fearful—always aware of the famous "audience of one."

Things are out of whack, and even though we all know this, it still



President Donald Trump at the White House, April 1.

should be said now and then.

Ronald Reagan late in his presidency, in a valedictory appearance at a Republican National Convention, spoke of how he personally experienced the office: "You don't become president of the United States. You are given temporary custody of an institution called the presidency, which belongs to our people." He approached his two administrations as "a sacred trust." This was pushback against the idea of an imperial presidency, in which man and office are fused and personal power the point. But man's life is limited and the institution is continuous, an inheritance accumulated across time. It was also a rebuke to the idea of grandiosity, in which inflated self-regard amounts to a distorted relationship with reality.

The Founders would agree. James Madison felt the ambitions and vanities of men must be countered and balanced through conscious governmental structures. Alexander Hamilton wanted energy in the executive—the president must be strong enough to do what is necessary, to lead and leave his mark, but that office can't become a tool of personal ambition,

whim or will. President Washington's actions were more eloquent than words can be: When he left office and lay down power, he was implying the presidency ran through him but would now be redirected, by the people, to run through someone else for a time, and so on.

It's all gotten too ego-driven, too strangely dependent on the magic of personality, too vainglorious and, yes, grandiose. This style has been growing, unevenly, among presidents for some time, but never as it is now and under Mr. Trump.

Last week the Treasury announced Mr. Trump's signature will appear on U.S. currency. Why? Maybe he was in the mood to sign dollars and those around him, knowing everything in their lives depends on him, that what power they enjoy flows from him, said: Yes sir, your mood is all.

Mr. Trump was in the mood to knock down the East Wing of the White House and build in its place something huge and imposing, certainly needed, possibly grand. But the drawings appear strange, with the new edifice dwarfing all around it in a way that is disharmonious, dominating.

At the beginning of the war, exact U.S. objectives weren't clearly or formally stated, and I guessed the president would make them clear the day operations cease. Whatever the state of play at that point will be exactly what he set out to achieve. I still believe that is true.

And if he's in the mood for it, we'll have a parade.

The president's foes keep saying we are losing our democracy, but if we continue down this path we will lose our republic—chipping away at its balance, its expectations and wisdom.

Imagine a Congress that looks at a war and denies it's a war so it won't have to debate the war in front of the American people.

Imagine a president going to the Supreme Court oral arguments on birthright citizenship and sitting in the audience to stare down the justices who may rule against his government's case. That actually happened Wednesday morning. It has never happened before in all U.S. history. (And surely, it will prove a miscalculation. That court is not going to be afraid of his glowering visage. That court is part of a branch that still knows its job.)

This whole big shambolic miracle machine only keeps rolling because we are an amazing thing—a democratic republic. Both are important words, both essential. But "democratic" is an adjective modifying a noun.

In a republic, the noun, supreme power is held by the people and their elected representatives, constrained by law. In a democratic republic the people choose those representatives through elections with broad suffrage. The republic brings with it constitutional limits, separations of power. Democracy brings with it popular will, and implies popular passion, and the possibility of excess.

We are both, and must be.

The Russian People Want the Internet Back

By Amy Knight

Faced with a war-weary public and a deteriorating economy, the Kremlin is alarmed by foreign-based internet platforms—with good reason. On the messaging app Telegram, the pro-Kremlin lawyer Ilya Remeslo, well-known as a scathing critic of democratic activists and a strong supporter of the war against Ukraine, made a stunning about-face on March 17. Mr. Remeslo condemned Vladimir Putin for waging the war, impoverishing the country, and destroying internet and media freedom. He described Mr. Putin as an illegitimate president who should be "brought to justice as a war criminal and thief."

Online freedom becomes a burning issue as the government shuts down popular discontent.

Mr. Remeslo then checked himself into a psychiatric hospital. His criticism must have rattled the Kremlin. Before Putin confidant Yevgeny Prigozhin and the Wagner Group turned against Mr. Putin in their infamous mutiny of June 2023, Prigozhin took to Telegram to denounce Russia's generals.

Beginning April 1, Telegram was set to be completely blocked in Russia, but Russians are reportedly using the app through virtual private networks. Authorities had already banned YouTube, Instagram and Facebook, along with the messaging apps Signal and WhatsApp. Shutdowns of mobile internet in Moscow and other cities have hurt the economy, and discontent over internet restrictions is rising.

For close to a year Russia's regions have endured regular mobile internet shutdowns because of drone strikes, but Moscow wasn't affected until last month. From March 5 to 24, most of the city had no mobile internet. A re-

gional official said, "Now Moscow is dealing with the same thing we are [in the other regions]. Some people are even gloating: 'we've had to put up with it, and now you can too.'" Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the shutdown was to ensure security. The Bell, an independent Russian media outlet, reported the Moscow directive was issued by the Scientific and Technical Service, part of the Federal Security Service, or FSB, and speculated that further interruptions are on the way.

For Muscovites, the restrictions were especially galling. Services such as couriers, taxis and retail business all depend on the mobile internet. Cashless payment terminals in cafes and shops stopped functioning, and public restrooms were inaccessible because payment couldn't be processed. In the first five days of the shutdown the city's businesses lost an estimated 3 billion to 5 billion rubles.

When mobile internet returned to Moscow, the head of Rostelecom, Mikhail Oseevsky, urged Russians to switch to landline phones. He claimed that requests for installing this reliable phone had grown significantly. A survey by the independent media outlet Meduza's Telegram channel of 50,000 readers, however, found that only 2% were considering having landline phones installed.

Although Russian authorities have had Telegram in their sights for years, the service remained largely accessible to an estimated 93.6 million Russians until last fall, when the app was blocked intermittently in some regions and later subjected to slowdowns throughout the country. Blocking the messaging app entirely could lead to serious blowback. As the Moscow Times noted: "Beyond its function as a messenger, Telegram is a news platform, a way for officials and state agencies to interact with constituents, a microblogging platform, a frontline communications tool in the Ukraine war, a way for NGOs and news outlets to receive tips and even a business tool."

The government made public a "whitelist" of approved websites that remain accessible during outages and is trying to persuade Russians to use a Max messenger, which is pre-installed on smartphones for sale in Russia. But everyone is wary of the app. A cyber security expert told Forbes last year that Max is "insecure by design to serve its purpose: people surveillance."

A recent opinion poll by the Kremlin-linked polling agency Russia Field found that more than 80% of Russian teenagers reacted negatively to the internet restrictions, with many expressing anger and confusion. Analogous surveys of Russian adults ha-

ven't been published to avoid drawing attention to the scale of discontent, according to reporting in Meduza.

Russian authorities are keeping a lid on public discontent over internet shutdowns. Applications for rallies in defense of internet freedom have been consistently rejected by the government, which cites the ban on demonstrations that went into force in 2020 due to Covid. On March 29, police arrested 13 protesters at a small rally on Moscow's Bolotnaya Square. Large demonstrations had been planned in several cities, but authorities have pressured the organizers, even arresting some, causing the rallies to be cancelled.

The Kremlin's apparent goal is to gain total control of internet services, similar to what China has achieved. But in the process it is alienating many Russians, especially young people, and depriving citizens of legitimate outlets for airing their grievances. So long as the war in Ukraine continues, it could be only a matter of time before Russians who share Ilya Remeslo's sentiments defy authorities and take to the streets nevertheless.

Ms. Knight is author, most recently, of "The Kremlin's Moose: Putin's Bitter Feud With the Oligarch Who Made Him Ruler of Russia."

Trump and Bismarck in the Same Sentence



BUSINESS WORLD
By Holman W. Jenkins, Jr.

slur but a prayer in the financial markets where it was coined. Donald Trump didn't arrive on his own at his Wednesday night claim that the Strait of Hormuz would open "naturally" once the shooting stops. Markets already believed salvation was going to come quicker from Mr. Trump standing down than from him escalating. The U.S. is perfectly capable of escalating, albeit not at a cost that likely interests the president.

The alternative? If the U.S. stands down, the strait no longer is a U.S. problem. It becomes the world's problem—and Iran's.

The strait isn't leverage over the U.S. if the U.S. doesn't care. If Iran continues to threaten the trade of noncombatant nations, Mr. Trump might even find himself entreated to rejoin the fight. Hydrocarbon customers in Europe and Asia might demand he renew his potent threat to attack Iran's own export facilities.

The incentive needles for Iran shift 180 degrees. Its key patron, China, gets less than 2 million barrels a day from Tehran—and 9 million from other Gulf countries currently shut in. China's own exported recovery screeches to a halt if importing nations are in recession or depression thanks to the Hormuz shutdown.

If a Danish frigate decides to sail through the strait after the war ends, is Iran going to start a new war with NATO?

Four-dimensional chess isn't what I'm alleging. Mr. Trump cer-

ates chaos and America's blessed superior strategic position lets it sail through and gives him options.

He miscalculated on several fronts, but incipiently between the lines of his Iran gambit seem to be recurrent Trump objectives (and crotchets) regarding allies, energy and trade. Or maybe not so incipiently, according to maritime analyst John R. Heil, in his widely read essay partly titled, "What If the U.S. Navy Isn't in a Hurry to Reopen the Strait?"

Here we need a note for the press. "Strategy" isn't listing your desirables. "Strategy" is explaining how you intend to find or create the leverage to realize them.

With his Iran war, the U.S. president is creating chaos for the world and wider options for himself.

Mr. Trump has made clear he doesn't want to be the neutral protector of the Gulf, upholder of what became known in 1980 as the Carter Doctrine. The doctrine was really a rephrasing of a longer-standing U.S. commitment to protect Western energy supplies from an invading rival superpower, and not—as Mr. Trump is discovering in a crisis that he himself instigated—from a rampaging local actor.

Nine countries, at any time, could use their Persian and Oman Gulf shoreline to frighten risk-averse captains and insurers from using the strait. In a 1984 HBO docudrama, it was Oman, after a left-wing coup, that blocked traffic and demanded tolls as Iran now is doing.

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on who's in charge of which Gulf nation. The U.S. intended to deter Soviet tanks assaulting from the north or Egypt. The U.S. didn't plan to police thousands of miles of coastline and hinterland. It didn't mean to substitute itself for what self-interest, mutual deterrence and the world's eagerness to hand over trillions of dollars should do: keep locals aligned around free passage and ready to restore it swiftly after an interruption.

Mr. Trump's own ambition is simpler—to cozy up to local potentates and add their energy power to America's (while putting up some Trump Towers). At the moment, this scheme has been tempered by factors he didn't reckon on. Iran didn't fold the way he hoped. Mr. Trump is a lame duck, with low approvals and a surplus of voter distrust, likely ruling out a ground-troops option. You go to war—or not—with the president you have. The leverage Mr. Trump lacks isn't with Iran, it's with the American people.

Even another variable may yet prove relevant to the timeline of his remaining presidency, which hasn't quite three years to run. Iran's regime is shakier than it has been in decades. It massacred 30,000 of its most vibrant citizens. Its economy is imploding. Its leadership has been culled of its most experienced (and bought-off) members by Israel's decapitation strikes.

Allah's decrepit and corrupt representatives on earth wouldn't seem to have a long-term lease no matter what Mr. Trump does next. Hang on to your hats. The president has signaled U.S. air strikes will end in two or three weeks—while, importantly, the world still has plenty of oil in strategic reserve. Don't be too shocked if 10 million Iranians come out into the streets to celebrate the end of the war and continue to celebrate until the regime is gone.

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