

# Opinion

SUNDAY, MARCH 8, 2026

## HOPE & REDEMPTION IN T20 WORLD CUP FINAL



■ New Zealand leads 3-0 against India with wins in 2007, 2016 & 2021

■ India bounced back in knock-outs (50 overs) with twin victories in 2023 CWC semis & 2025 CT final. Kiwis were defeated once each by India in the group stage clash of respective ICC events

■ India has created history by becoming the first-ever team to reach fourth consecutive ICC tournament finals since 2023. Led by Suryakumar Yadav, India is the third team after Pakistan (2007 & 2009) & Sri Lanka (2012 & 2014) to make back-to-back finals — Compiled by Ankit Pattnaik

### KEY PLAYERS

■ Sanju Samson, Suryakumar Yadav, Hardik Pandya and Jasprit Bumrah (INDIA)

■ Finn Allen, Tim Seifert, Rachin Ravindra & Mitchell Santner (NEW ZEALAND)

### X-FACTOR(S)

■ Abhishek Sharma, Ishan Kishan & Axar Patel (INDIA)

■ Daryl Mitchell, Glenn Phillips & Cole McCool (NEW ZEALAND)

## India favourites, but Kiwis can surprise

### RINGSIDE VIEW

Tushar Bhaduri

IN A WAY, the final we have got in the ICC T20 World Cup is the one most likely. India have been the most dominant side in the format since they clinched the title in 2024 and were odds-on favourites going into the tournament on home soil. The Indian Premier League has produced a whole generation of players adept in the shortest format of the game, even if that may come at the expense of prowess in longer forms of cricket.

As far as the rest of the world is concerned, one will struggle to find another team with the comparable resources and mindset to consistently succeed in T20 cricket. The Australian cricketing establishment seems a bit confused on how much importance is to be given to this format. It may not be “hit and giggle” cricket any more, as Ricky Ponting once famously called it in the early days of this version, but it’s still very much the third format of the game for them. Key players are not risked for the T20 World Cup if there’s a slight niggle, as was the case with Pat Cummins who prioritised a hectic upcoming period of Test cricket. Steve Smith was not included in the squad despite being in prime form in the Big Bash League, even when injuries to other players provided an opening. When he was eventually included, he wasn’t fielded in the do-or-die game against Sri Lanka.

England have not thrived in Indian conditions of late, especially in white-ball cricket. They flourished in spin-friendly conditions in Sri Lanka, but India in India is a different kettle of fish and they fell just short, despite a brilliant hundred by Jacob Bethell. The same can be said about the West Indies, while Pakistan and Sri Lanka ceased to be genuine forces in any format a long time ago. South Africa did South Africa things in the tournament, dominating all comers – including India – before having their worst game at the most inopportune time.

That left New Zealand as the last challenger standing and though they lost two games, they did just enough – as they usually do – to make the knockouts before having a great match in the semifinals.

The Kiwis’ last two visits to these shores have brought them unprecedented success. They whitewashed India 3-0 in the Test series in late 2024 and a year later, won their first bilateral ODI rubber in this country. So, if one believes in omens, they can complete the cycle by having success in the T20 format on this trip.

### Loose ends

That would make India wary of the Kiwi challenge but truth be told, man for man, the hosts are the much better outfit, even if there are a few problem areas.

Abhishek Sharma was expected to light up the tournament, based on what he had done in the preceding months. But the left-handed opener’s take-no-prisoners approach has come unstuck under the harsh spotlight.

Varun Chakaravarty finds himself in a similar situation, after being virtually unplayable in the early part of the tournament. The mystery-spinner is still around the top in the wicket-takers charts, but the slightly uncharitable way to describe his recent struggles would be

to conclude that the combination of flatter wickets and stronger opposition has found him out a bit.

On the other hand, Sanju Samson seems to have found a new lease of life when given the latest of his many opportunities. He had flattered to deceive on several previous occasions, but judging by the back-to-back match-winning performances under the most intense pressure, the penny seems to have finally dropped.

But the Pole Star of this Indian team continues to be Jasprit Bumrah. He is generally considered the ‘cheat code’ for the team regardless of conditions or match situation. Greats of the game – past and present – seem to be falling over each other to sing his praises. It wouldn’t be far-fetched to conclude that the semifinal against England – a game in which almost 500 runs were scored in 40 overs – was decided by the four overs bowled by the Indian pace spearhead conceding just 33 runs, including just six in the crucial 18th, during the chase. But the secret of India’s progress to the final is that they have found men for every occasion when things have got tight. Axar Patel’s name comes readily to mind. When he isn’t bowling useful spells or trouble-shooting with the bat, the all-rounder is making match-winning contributions in the field – like he did in the semifinal. Tilak Varma has done whatever the team has asked of him, at any batting position, while the value of the cameos by Shivam Dube – regardless of their duration – can’t be overemphasised. Arshdeep Singh gets wickets with the new ball and can be relied upon to do a job in the death overs.

### No lightweight

New Zealand are often bigger than the sum of their parts. They may not let out the most intimidating vibe, but at the risk of stereotyping, punch above their weight in international cricket. Their secret lies in full preparation, attention to detail and being ready for whatever is thrown at them. Conventional wisdom would have one believing that they can’t have as good a game as they had in the semifinal against South Africa, but it’s never advisable to rule the Black Caps out.

The Indian team management would have noticed how Finn Allen and Tim Seifert took the Proteas pace attack apart in Kolkata. They may be tempted to utilise their biggest guns early on to neutralise their threat.

Glenn Phillips and Daryl Mitchell have had a lot of success in these parts while Rachin Ravindra feels at home in Indian conditions.

Their bowling may not boast of big names but speedster Matt Henry is a quality performer and skipper Mitchell Santner leads a quality spin attack. The Kiwis seem to relish their underdog status as it puts all the pressure on their opposition.

Talking of pressure, the venue and the crowd adds another dimension to the contest. India has a few ghosts to exorcise after the 2023 50-over World Cup when the final against Australia at the same Narendra Modi Stadium was expected to be a coronation rather than a contest, but turned out differently. The huge crowd that’s expected could be the veritable 12th man when things are going well for the home side but the silence that would engulf the vast stadium when things get close or are running against the hosts can put the pressure of realizing their expectations on the Indian players.

Playing at home is a great advantage but in certain conditions, could be a double-edged sword.

## ACROSS THE AISLE

P Chidambaram



The US President cannot declare war against another country without the authorisation of the US Congress. Such interventions are also against the UN Charter. Apart from being illegal, it is illegitimate for any country to change the regime of another sovereign nation

ANOTHER WAR HAS broken out. Israel is the provocateur. The United States is the executioner.

Israel has convinced President Donald Trump that Iran has, or has nearly completed developing, nuclear weapons and has laid out plans to threaten the United States.

However, *The Wall Street Journal* has reported that US officials with *access to classified information* have flat-out denied the alleged threats as unsubstantiated. Yet, Mr Trump has launched a full-scale war against Iran in partnership with Israel.

### Past canards

The alleged threat of Iran’s nuclear weapons is of the piece with the canard that Iraq had ‘weapons of mass destruction’ that President Bush used to invade Iraq (2003). It is also like the canard that Muammar al-Gaddafi had planned a massacre of civilians in Libya that President Obama propagated to justify the US intervention to ‘prevent a humanitarian crisis’ (2011). Mr Trump re-invented the Monroe Doctrine to bring about a ‘regime change’ in Venezuela (2026) and has expanded the doctrine to launch a war against Iran.

These military interventions were – and are – illegal. The President of the United States cannot declare war against another country without the authorisation of the US Congress. Such interventions are also against the Charter of the United Nations.

Apart from being illegal, it is illegitimate



Trump’s support to Israel has shut the door against any role that India could have played to bring the war to an end or prevent its spread to other Arab countries

## India bends to world’s policeman

iminate for any country to change the regime of another sovereign nation. Just as it is an illegitimate war that Russia is waging against Ukraine, it was illegitimate for the US to abduct President Maduro of Venezuela and it is illegitimate for the US and Israel to eliminate Ayatollah Khamenei and his fellow leaders of Iran. India condoled the deaths only after six days.

Addressing the Knesset (Israel’s Parliament), Prime Minister Narendra Modi offered India’s condolences to Israeli families “whose world was shattered in the barbaric attack by Hamas on October 7.”

He added, *startlingly*, “India stands with Israel, firmly, with full conviction, in this moment, and beyond.” But he uttered not one word of condemnation about the virtual obliteration of the Palestinian settlements in Gaza. While it is true that 1,219 Israelis were killed in the Hamas’ unprovoked attack, it is also true that over 70,000 Palestinians were killed in Gaza by Israel.

Mr Modi’s speech was made on February 25, 2026. The war was started by the US and Israel on February 28. Iran retaliated and attacked US military bases in several Arab countries.

Mr Trump said that the war may continue for four to five weeks or more. His support to Israel has shut the door against any role that India could have played to bring the war to an end or prevent its spread to other Arab countries. Losing its moral authority, India is an inept spectator while the war rages

across the region and beyond, including international waters near Sri Lanka.

### Regime change

The central issue is ‘regime change’. However bad a regime may be in a country, it is no business of any other country to change the regime by force. By that standard, there are over 50 countries where the current government deserves to be changed. Many such dictators are, in fact, friends and clients of the United States.

In June 2025, the US, at the instigation of Israel, carried out ‘Midnight Hammer’ and, after 12 days, claimed that “Iran’s key nuclear enrichment facilities have been totally obliterated.” If that claim was true, how could Iran have stockpiled nuclear weapons or enriched uranium that posed a threat to the United States?

Besides, Oman, which was mediating between Iran and the US, had categorically said that Iran had ‘agreed to zero stockpiling of enriched uranium and to never, ever possess nuclear bombs’. Mr Sergey Lavrov, Russia’s foreign minister, asked a pertinent question, “Where is the evidence of nuclear weapons in Iran?” Like some other wars that the US had launched in the past, the war against Iran is based on an untruth.

Israel is a sworn enemy of Iran and vice versa. The US has virtually eliminated threats to Israel from Iraq and Libya. Israel has made peace, at least for the time being, with Saudi Arabia. Iran

alone stood in Israel’s way of being the sole and dominant power in the Middle East. Israel has inveigled the US to bring about a regime change in Iran and reduce Iran to a subservient state. That is an abhorrent doctrine.

However bad a regime may be, it is the sole right of the people of that country to change the regime.

There are exaggerated claims of success by the US and Israel. Mr Alon Mizrahi, a respected Israeli correspondent, has a different narrative. This is a war without soldiers. Machines are fighting machines. The machines that are most lethal and are in endless supply will win.

### India stands diminished

Amidst the growing violence and destruction throughout the region, India, which has vital interests – human, economic and political – in the region is isolated. Iran has targeted US military bases in Jordan, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, UAE and Iraq. There are 1 crore Indians in the region. India has oil, export and other economic interests. It has committed to invest \$370 million in Chabahar Port in Iran. Despite these interests, India is without a *voice or influence* – all because of India’s unprincipled endorsement of Israel’s objectives.



Website: pchidambaram.in  
X: @Pchidambaram\_IN

## INSIDE TRACK

COOMI KAPOOR



### Measured moves

At the first Cabinet meeting in his new office at ‘Seva Teerth’, Prime Minister Narendra Modi expressed unhappiness at recent controversies in the Union Education Ministry. He felt there should be stocktaking by all ministries of reforms introduced since the start of his third term.

Subsequently, the Cabinet Secretary wrote to private secretaries of ministers asking for a review of reforms introduced since 2024. Many read in Modi’s remarks an indication of a likely Cabinet reshuffle. It was noticeable that, later, ministers with dual portfolios were spending far more time in offices of their additional portfolios and interacting with officials.

But, it is not Modi’s style to rush into action and give the impression of bowing to pressure. If ministerial changes are made, it will not be immediately. After the Epstein papers, Petroleum Minister Hardeep Puri, whose Rajya Sabha term expires by year end, has been facing the heat.

Also, the RSS is upset with the UGC’s equity norms, released last month, to check discrimination on campus, which the Supreme Court has since stayed. The BJP apprehends that upper castes will feel alienated if the measures are adopted.

Some attribute the UGC’s drafting misjudgment to the fact that Dharmendra Pradhan’s education ministry does not have an RSS representative to “vet” sensitive decisions. Pradhan, however, remains a favourite of Modi, Shah and a section of the RSS and is unlikely to be dropped.

### Lutyens’s signature stays

It is a moot point whether the bust of Sir Edwin Lutyens was removed from the Rashtrapati Bhavan, the magnificent building he designed, because of his alleged racist views on Indians and his “belittling” of Indian architecture and culture, or the fact that the term ‘Lutyens Delhi’ has come to personify the capital’s elite, with a Nehruvian mindset, who dominated politics, culture and the liberal narrative in Delhi in the pre-Modi days. Those considered part of ‘Lutyens Delhi’ are understandably among those incensed over the bust’s removal.

Interestingly, few are aware that Lutyens left his distinctive signature on Rashtrapati Bhavan in the form of a unique roshandan (skylight)

designed in the shape of his spectacles. The window is discreetly located in the corridor leading to the Press Secretary’s office.

Incidentally the real colonial relic – visible during Giani Zail Singh’s presidential tenure – is the throne of King George VI, cleverly camouflaged with an Ashoka Chakra brass canopy and converted into the President’s chair. One wonders if it still remains.

### Speaking of which

Political parties should be queuing up to recruit Neha Singh, Galgotia University’s head of communications. Singh may have been left holding the bag after a Chinese-made robotic dog was presented as “developed” by the university, at the recent global AI Impact Summit in Delhi, but what left viewers awed was that she remained unabashed and exuded confidence despite the major goof-up.

Singh explained it away with the quip “Your 6 can be my 9”, with many seeing in an Amitabh Bachchan line from an old film, and asserted that in her “enthusiasm and speaking in a jiffy”, she might not have “come across as very eloquent”.

Singh is clearly a believer in the maxim originally expounded by British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli, “never explain, never complain”. With the BJP often ill-served by

some shrill spokespersons on TV, whose defence is often whataboutery or verbal slanging, the absence of the late Arun Jaitley, the unofficial media adviser to Narendra Modi, even before Modi became the Prime Minister, is sorely felt. Jaitley seldom made the mistake of defending the indefensible.

As a brilliant lawyer, he knew how to frame his arguments depending on his audience and never strayed far from the truth, rather deflecting.

### Blue diary

When former Chhattisgarh CM Bhupesh Baghel’s son Chaitanya was first jailed in September last year for alleged involvement in the state’s liquor scandal, his family viewed it as a badge of honour.

Three generations of Baghels have been imprisoned in Raipur Central Jail, and later freed by courts. But when Chaitanya’s case was taken over by the ED and he failed to get bail, he was no longer gung ho.

Last month, he finally secured bail, though there is a buzz that his statement to the authorities could have implicated a congress high-up in Delhi.

In political circles, the term ‘Blue Diary’ is being talked about by some in the same manner as the ‘Jain Diary’ case of two decades ago, which had created noise for allegedly recording payments to political figures.



# PROFILES

## The philosopher who seeks vengeance

**Ali Larijani**

The Secretary of Iran's Security Council, who has emerged as a voice of the country's defiance in the time of war, says Tehran will not talk to the U.S. and will deliver 'an unforgettable lesson to international oppressors'

**Stanly Johny**

On March 1, a day after the U.S. and Israel started bombing Iran, Donald Trump said in an interview that the Iranian leaders wanted to resume negotiations. "I have agreed to talk," he said. A response came swiftly from Ali Larijani, Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council. "We will not negotiate with the Americans," he wrote in a social media post.

"You have set ablaze the hearts of the Iranian people," he said in an interview, referring to the assassination of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader. "We will burn the hearts of our enemies."

In the days that followed, the U.S. and Israel pounded Iran. Mr. Trump asked the Iranians to take over state institutions. It did not happen. Iran retaliated by launching missiles at American bases in the Persian Gulf, and Israel. On March 6, both President Masoud Pezeshkian and Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi said Iran was not immediately seeking a ceasefire. Mr. Trump then demanded "an unconditional surrender".

As the war unfolds with regional implications, Mr. Larijani has emerged as a defiant face and voice of the Islamic Republic. The Security Council he leads is one of the most important institutions of the state, especially during wartime. Founded in 1989 under the revised Constitution, the Council's main responsibility is to define defence and national security policies. The secretary of the Security Council is roughly the equivalent of the National Security Adviser of India.

Mr. Larijani came of age during the tremulous years of pre-revolutionary Iran. His father, Grand Ayatollah Hashem Amoli, a renowned Shia cleric, fled to Iraq in the 1930s to avoid persecution under the Shah. Ali Larijani was born in Najaf, the central Iraqi city that hosts the tomb of Imam Ali, in 1958. The Larijanis moved back to Iran in 1960. Ali Larijani studied in a religious seminary in Qom and got a Bachelor of Science degree in computer science from Aryamehr University of Technology, Tehran. For

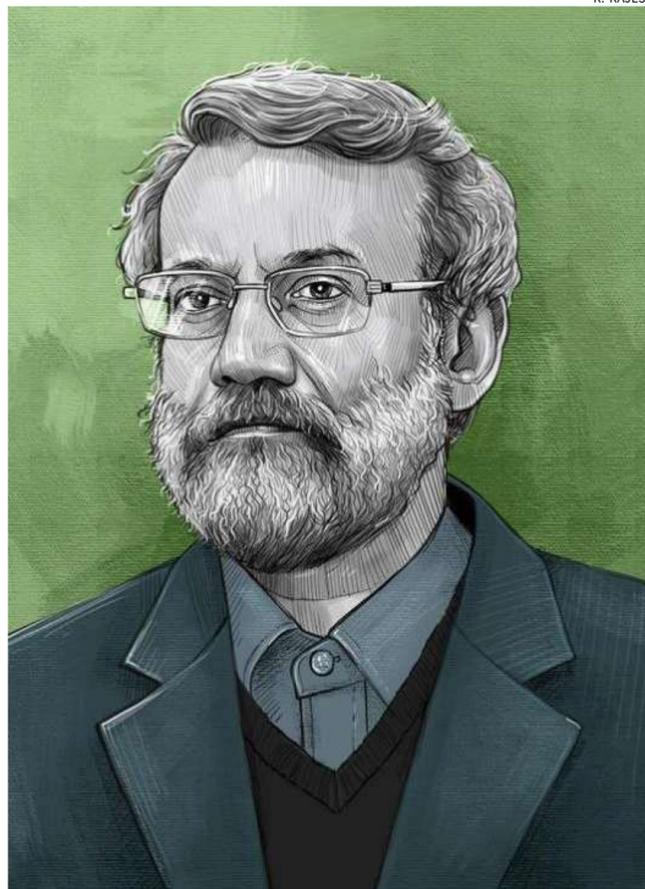
his Master's and Ph.D., he switched to Western philosophy. According to a profile of Mr. Larijani on the University of Tehran website, he has published three books on Immanuel Kant (all in Farsi) – *The Mathematical Method in Kant's Philosophy*, *Metaphysics and the Exact Sciences in Kant's Philosophy*, and *Intuition and Synthetic A Priori Judgments in Kant's Philosophy*. He has written a book on Descartes's *Discourse on the Method*. He has additionally written about Saul Kripke – the American philosopher of language and modal logic – and David Lewis, the analytical metaphysician.

### A member of the elite

But in Iran, the philosopher found refuge in revolution. Like many of his peers who were inspired by the 1979 revolution, Mr. Larijani joined the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the paramilitary organisation founded by Ayatollah Khomeini soon after the Shah was toppled.

For Mr. Larijani, the years with the IRGC became the foundation of a long career in Iran's security and political establishment. During the administration of President Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-97), he was appointed Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance. In 1994, he became the Director-General of the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), an arm of the Office of the Supreme Leader. This role brought him closer to the Leader (*Rahbar*), Ayatollah Khamenei. That was the beginning of a long relationship between the Imam and the philosopher. By the turn of the century, Mr. Larijani had become one of the key figures of the elite of the Republic.

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the conservative politician who became President in 2005, appointed Mr. Larijani head of the Security Council and chief nuclear negotiator. As a nuclear negotiator, he sent mixed signals. He once likened European incentives to abandon Iran's nuclear programme to "exchanging a pearl for a candy bar". But the same Mr. Larijani quit the Security Council in 2007 amid disagreements with Mr. Ahmadinejad, whose hardline policies had deepened Iran's global isolation. It was a rare



R. RAJESH

public rupture in the conservative camp. After falling out with Mr. Ahmadinejad, Mr. Larijani moved to parliamentary politics. In 2008, he got elected to the Majles and became Speaker, a position he would hold till 2020. When Hassan Rouhani pursued nuclear talks with the U.S. and signed a deal in 2015, Mr. Larijani, as Speaker, provided the much-needed legislative support for the President. When the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the nuclear deal, was put to debate in the Majles, Mr. Larijani gave just 20 minutes to discuss it for Parliament's 290 members, before

pushing it through.

In domestic politics, he has been associated with the principalist (hardline) camp. He was supported by the Islamic Society of Engineers, a principalist political organisation. In 2005, when he stood for the presidential elections for the first time, his bid was supported by the Council for Coordination of the Forces of the Revolution, an umbrella group of conservative organisations. He finished sixth, winning only 5.94% of the votes, but became the Security Council Secretary. In 2021 and 2024, he registered for the presidential election,

but his nomination was rejected by the powerful Guardian Council. But Masoud Pezeshkian, who won the 2024 presidential election, brought Mr. Larijani back as the Security Council Secretary.

### Security czar

For years, Iran had built a sprawling network of allies in West Asia both as a deterrent and as an offensive strategy. The champion of this forward defence was Qassem Soleimani, the Quds Force General who was assassinated by the U.S. in January 2020. That was a big blow to Iran. When Gen. Soleimani was killed, Mr. Larijani warned that the killing would alter the political balance of the region. "The response to Haj Qassem Soleimani's blood should be measures to make American forces flee from the region," he said, according to *Tehran Times*.

In April 2025, amid rising tensions between Israel and Iran, Mr. Larijani said if attacked, Iran would have "no choice" but to get nuclear weapons. "We are not moving towards nuclear weapons, but if you do something wrong in the Iranian nuclear issue, you will force Iran to move towards that because it has to defend itself," he said. Two months later, Israel started bombing Iran, triggering the 12-day war. The U.S. joined Israel on June 22 in bombing Iran's nuclear facilities.

In June, Mr. Trump declared victory, but the crisis was far from over. Mr. Larijani endorsed the nuclear talks that opened in January 2026 following protests in Iran. The U.S. and Iran held three rounds of talks. On February 27, Oman's Foreign Minister who was mediating the talks, said a deal was within reach. Within hours the U.S. and Israel launched the war.

Amid war and a political vacuum, a furious Iran responded with its drones and ballistic missiles. "The brave soldiers and the great nation of Iran will deliver an unforgettable lesson to the hellish international oppressors," Mr. Larijani said. Eight days into the war, Iran has been hit hard by the U.S. and Israel. Tehran has retaliated by escalating its attacks across the region. The IRGC, the revolutionary force where Mr. Larijani cut his teeth, has warned of a "prolonged war".

### THE GIST

During the administration of President Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-97), Ali Larijani was appointed Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance

He contested the 2005 presidential election and finished sixth. But post-polls, he was appointed secretary of the Security Council

He registered for presidential elections in 2021 and 2024, but was rejected by the Guardian Council. After the 2024 election, he was brought back to the Security Council

## The bell strikes

### Rastriya Swatantra Party

The party that campaigned on anti-corruption, anti-establishment platforms has emerged as the winner of Nepal's first post-protest election

**Sanjeev Satgainya**

Rabi Lamichhane was a television personality until a few years ago, known for his confrontational talk show *Sidha Kura Janata Sang* (Direct talk with the people), in which he frequently criticised politicians and highlighted public grievances.

Buoyed by his popularity, he launched a political experiment. In June 2022, he founded the Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP). He strategically included "Swatantra", meaning "independent", in the name to signal that the party was distinct from the established parties. The elections were just six months away.

When Nepal went to the polls in November that year, the RSP surprised everyone – it finished fourth. A key challenge for the RSP, however, was that despite being the fourth-largest party and enjoying public support, few saw it as a formidable force capable of challenging established parties. First, it lacked a clear ideology. Second, the party was synonymous with "Rabi" or "Ghanti" – the bell, the party's election symbol.

Many viewed its rise with scepticism, saying it was a fleeting success driven by public frustration with Nepal's old guard –



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Nepali Congress, CPN-UML, and CPN (Maoist Centre). Mr. Lamichhane's controversial moves as Minister – the RSP had joined the government twice between 2022 and 2024 – and his brushes with the law dented the party's image. He has been in and out of jail multiple times over charges of embezzling cooperative funds.

As it evolved, the party worked on its ideological clarity and now calls itself a pluralistic democratic party that espouses a liberal economy with social justice – centrist liberal in short. The party's views on the current federal structure remain unclear, with multiple leaders making different public statements about the form of governance. In July 2024, when the two biggest parties – the Nepali Congress and the CPN-UML – joined hands to form a government, the RSP was pushed into a meek opposition.

Last September's Gen Z protests, which the RSP

supported, did further damage. Some influential leaders deserted the party. Mr. Lamichhane faced allegations of escaping jail during the chaos on September 9, the second day of the protests. He, however, turned himself in. The protests, which claimed 77 lives – including 19 in police firing – toppled the K.P. Sharma Oli government, triggering election.

### Anti-corruption mood

The RSP, which was almost on the verge of implosion, suddenly became the beneficiary of the protests against corruption and misrule – what the party claims as its own agenda – with public anger directed mostly against the Nepali Congress and the UML. In late December, then Kathmandu Mayor Balendra Shah, known as Balen, joined the RSP as the party's prime ministerial candidate.

In the run-up to the March 5 election, the RSP saw growing public sup-

port – many calling it a 'Balen effect'. The party, once synonymous with 'Rabi', became synonymous with either 'Balen' or 'Ghanti', resonating with a larger electorate, beyond party lines.

The four-year-old party, once criticised for lacking an ideology, has dealt a major blow to the established parties in the March 5 election. The RSP is set to secure a majority of 138 seats, with trends suggesting it could even reach a two-thirds majority of 184 in the 275-member House. As of now, the party has won 57 seats under the first-past-the-post system and is leading in 64 out of 165 constituencies. It is ahead under the proportional representation system, in which 110 members are elected, securing a 53% vote share.

Balen is set to defeat Mr. Oli by a huge margin. Gagan Thapa of the Nepali Congress is set to suffer a loss in Sarlahi-4, a constituency in the Madhesh plains, at the hands of an old Congress member now running on RSP ticket.

Chandan Goopta, a data analyst following the polls in Madhesh, says this time the election was about Balen versus the rest. "It's not Gagan vs Amresh Singh [the RSP candidate], it's Gagan vs Balen," he said. "It's the same for all constituencies [in Madhesh]."

## Hit to kill

### THAAD

The Terminal High Altitude Area Defence, one of the most advanced missile defence platforms developed by the U.S., is being tested in the U.S.-Israel war against Iran

**Saurabh Trivedi**

The Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) system is one of the most advanced missile defence platforms developed by the United States to counter ballistic missile threats.

Designed to intercept missiles during the final stage of their flight, THAAD can destroy incoming threats both inside and outside earth's atmosphere, providing a critical defensive layer against short-medium- and limited intermediate-range ballistic missiles. The U.S. deployed additional THAAD batteries to the West Asian region before it launched the invasion of Iran on February 28, along with other weapons.

Unlike many traditional air defence systems that rely on explosive warheads, THAAD uses "hit-to-kill" technology. This means its interceptor missiles destroy incoming targets by directly colliding with them at extremely high speeds, relying on kinetic energy rather than an explosive blast.

This approach significantly improves precision and reduces the risk of debris from explosive interceptors affecting populated areas. THAAD can engage ballistic missile targets at ranges of roughly 150-200 kilometres, inter-



REUTERS

cepting them at high altitude before they descend toward their intended targets.

### Key components

The THAAD weapon system is a major element of the broader Ballistic Missile Defence System (BMDS) architecture and consists of several integrated components: interceptors that destroy incoming missiles through kinetic impact; truck-mounted launchers used to deploy the interceptors; and the powerful AN/TPY-2 radar, which detects and tracks missile threats at a long range; a tactical fire control and communications unit that coordinates targeting and engagement; and additional logistics and support equipment.

A typical THAAD battery includes around 90 personnel, six launchers, and 48 interceptors, with each launcher carrying eight missiles.

THAAD is designed to operate as part of a layered

missile defence network. It can integrate with other systems such as the MIM-104 Patriot, including the Patriot Advanced Capability-3 (PAC-3), as well as the Aegis Ballistic Missile Defence system used by naval forces.

In recent tests, THAAD has demonstrated its ability to launch PAC-3 missile segment enhancement (MSE) interceptors, highlighting growing interoperability within the U.S. missile defence architecture.

The THAAD system is highly mobile and rapidly deployable, allowing the U.S. Army to position it in regions facing missile threats. The first operational THAAD battery was deployed to Guam in 2013. Internationally, the UAE became the first foreign buyer in 2011, followed later by Saudi Arabia.

The system has been in the spotlight ever since the latest war on Iran began on February 28. Iran has reportedly destroyed a key radar associated with the

THAAD system used by the U.S. to detect and intercept ballistic missiles in West Asia, dealing a major blow to Washington's regional missile defence network as the war on Iran enters its second week, according to media reports.

Satellite imagery cited in the reports suggests that an AN/TPY-2 radar, valued at around \$300 million and manufactured by RTX Corp., along with its support equipment, was destroyed at Muwaffaq Salti Air Base in Jordan during the early days of the conflict. The radar plays a critical role in guiding U.S. missile defence batteries deployed across the Persian Gulf.

But despite such setbacks, THAAD remains a critical piece in America's defensive shield. Ballistic missiles travel at extremely high speed and high altitudes, leaving little time for defence once they approach their targets. Systems like THAAD are designed to intercept these threats far from population centres and critical infrastructure, increasing the chances of neutralising them before impact.

As missile technology continues to evolve, THAAD remains a key element of the U.S. strategy to build a multi-layered missile defence shield capable of countering a wide range of ballistic missile threats.

# India bends to world's policeman



**ACROSS THE AISLE**  
BY P CHIDAMBARAM

**A**NOTHER WAR has broken out. Israel is the provocateur. The United States is the executioner. Israel has convinced President Donald Trump that Iran has, or has nearly completed developing, nuclear weapons and has laid out plans to threaten the United States. However, *The Wall Street Journal* has reported that US officials with *access to classified information* have flat-out denied the alleged threats as unsubstantiated. Yet, Mr Trump has launched a full-scale war against Iran in partnership with Israel.

## Past canards

The alleged threat of Iran's nuclear weapons is of a piece with the canard that Iraq had 'weapons of mass destruction' that President Bush used to invade Iraq (2003). It is also like the canard that Muammar al-Gaddafi had planned a massacre of civilians in Libya that President Obama propagated to justify the US intervention to 'prevent a humanitarian crisis' (2011). Mr Trump re-invented the Monroe Doctrine

to bring about a 'regime change' in Venezuela (2026) and has expanded the doctrine to launch a war against Iran.

These military interventions were — and are — illegal. The President of the United States cannot declare war against another country without the authorisation of the US Congress. Such interventions are also against the Charter of the United Nations. Apart from being illegal, it is illegitimate for any country to change the regime of another sovereign nation. Just as it is an illegitimate war that Russia is waging against Ukraine, it was illegitimate for the US to abduct President Maduro of Venezuela and it is illegitimate for the US and Israel to eliminate Ayatollah Khamenei and his fellow leaders in Iran. India condoned the deaths only after six days.

Addressing the Knesset (Israel's Parliament), Prime Minister Narendra Modi offered India's condolences to Israeli families "whose world was shattered in the barbaric attack by Hamas on October 7." He added, *startlingly*, "India stands with Israel, firmly, with full conviction, in this moment, and beyond." But he uttered not one word of condemnation about the virtual obliteration of the Palestinian settlements in Gaza. While it is true that 1,219 Israelis were killed in Hamas' unprovoked attack, it is also true that over 70,000 Palestinians were killed in Gaza by Israel.

Mr Modi's speech was made on February 25, 2026. The war was started by the US and Israel on February 28. Iran retaliated and attacked US military bases in several

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## Regime change

The central issue is 'regime change'. However bad a regime may be in a country, it is no business of any other country to change the regime by force. By that standard, there are over 50 countries where the current government deserves to be changed. Many such dictators are, in fact, friends and clients of the United States.

In June 2025, the US, at the instigation of Israel, carried out 'Midnight Hammer' and, after 12 days, claimed that "Iran's key nuclear enrichment facilities have been totally obliterated." If that claim was true, how could Iran have stockpiled nuclear weapons or enriched uranium that posed a threat to the United States? Besides, Oman, which was mediating between Iran and the US, had categorically said that Iran had 'agreed to zero stockpiling of enriched uranium and to never, ever possess nuclear bombs'. Mr Sergey Lavrov, Russia's foreign minister, asked a pertinent question, "Where is the evidence of nuclear weapons in Iran?" Like some other wars that the US had launched in the past, the war against

Iran is based on an untruth.

Israel is a sworn enemy of Iran and vice versa. The US has virtually eliminated threats to Israel from Iraq and Libya. Israel has made peace, at least for the time being, with Saudi Arabia. Iran alone stood in Israel's way of being the sole and dominant power in the Middle East. Israel has inveigled the US to bring about a regime change in Iran and reduce Iran to a subservient state. That is an abhorrent doctrine. However bad a regime may be, it is the sole right of the people of that country to change the regime.

There are exaggerated claims of success by the US and Israel. Mr Alon Mizrahi, a respected Israeli correspondent, has a different narrative. This is a war without soldiers. Machines are fighting machines. The machines that are most lethal and are in endless supply will win.

## India stands diminished

Amidst the growing violence and destruction throughout the region, India, which has vital interests — human, economic and political — in the region is isolated. Iran has targeted US military bases in Jordan, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, UAE and Iraq. There are 1 crore Indians in the region. India has oil, export and other economic interests. It has committed to invest USD 370 million in Chabahar Port in Iran. Despite these interests, India is without a *voice or influence* — all because of India's unprincipled endorsement of Israel's objectives.

# The Ayatollah is dead



**FIFTH COLUMN**  
BY TAVLEEN SINGH

**T**HIS IS not a column that discusses international affairs. In it, you will have mostly read commentary about domestic issues. If this week I am going to make an exception and talk about an international event, it is because I have rarely seen an international event in which so many Indians have shown so much interest as the attack on Iran by the United States and Israel. The consequences of this war and its real objectives remain murky. What is clear is that the Ayatollah, who ruled Iran with diabolical despotism for nearly four decades, is dead.

When news came of the death of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, my first reaction was to celebrate. The death of all tyrants should be celebrated. If only because for a few blissful moments a heaviness seems to lift from the world. So, in cities across the world, Iranians celebrated the death of a man who destroyed the political and economic foundation of their country. Many of those who celebrated have been forced to leave their homeland as political refugees. Many have seen friends and family members tortured to death or executed by the Ayatollah's revolutionary guards. Women's voices were heard loudest in support of sisters and friends blinded or killed for the 'sin' of showing a few strands of hair. So why is it that Indian Muslims reacted so differently?

In Lucknow and Srinagar, Shia Muslims came out in the streets to beat their breasts, shout anti-American slogans and mourn the 'martyrdom' of a man they said was a great religious leader. Do Indian Muslims not have enough Indian problems to make them protest? Why is it always something that has happened in a distant country that brings them into the streets? They had the full support of leftist leaders, liberals and political parties. This lot has a very selective way of looking at tyranny. Their judgement depends on who the tyrant is. Personally, I have a distaste for religious leaders and despots in general, but in my view, when it comes to sheer evil, few would win a contest against the late Ayatollah.

After rage against his rule erupted in January, he unleashed the might of his theocratic and military empire upon his own people. Young men and women, some barely out of their teens, were gunned down in public squares. Women were thrown into jail and, according to unconfirmed reports, many were raped.

There is evidence from doctors that injured people were dragged out of hospital beds and shot. Thousands of protesters were killed in this crackdown. The exact numbers are hard to confirm. What have appeared on social media are images of mass graves and piles of body bags through which relatives of the dead wandered to find their loved ones. For me, this is enough to believe that the world is a better place without this theocratic tyrant in it.

It worries me that there are so many Indians, Muslim and Hindu, who think that the killing of the Ayatollah was wrong. In private conversations and on social media, I have spent most of last week discussing the dead despot with various people. I have found it hard to agree with the arguments they put forth. Some said it was a breach of the rules of international engagement to kill the leader of a sovereign state. Even one who broke all the rules himself when he set up terrorist armies like Hamas and Hezbollah? Really?

Others said that they feared that the United States and Israel have done something that will not change Iran for the better but change the world for the worse. They point out that despotism and tyranny in Iran are institutionalised and that below the Supreme Leader exist layers and layers of revolutionary guards, morality policemen and military men who support the policies that Iran has followed since the Islamic revolution nearly 50 years ago. The arguments that I found persuasive came from those who pointed out that regime change is unlikely when the roots of tyranny run so deep. This could well be true, and if things go wrong from here onwards, then the United States will be held accountable.

As I have said here more than once, most Indians care little about what happens in other countries. But the attack on Iran and Iran's violent response have so gripped the Indian imagination that I have gone nowhere last week without being accosted by someone who wants to know what I think about the 'Iran war'.

There is real trepidation about what will happen next. Many believe that this Middle Eastern war could lead to a much wider one and that India will inevitably be drawn into it. If we are, then it is my fervent hope that we pick the team that is led by the United States and Israel, because this is the team with democracies in it. The other team, led by China and Russia, is the one that our leftist intellectuals and politicians would like us to choose, because for reasons I do not understand, lefties and jihadis are more comfortable with despots and tyrants. One way or another, we need to accept that the world has changed dramatically since the death of the Ayatollah, and the immediate future looks bleak and more than a little scary.

# 1st Lok Sabha Speaker faced and survived a motion for removal



**INSIDE TRACK** | BY COOMMI KAPOOR

## MEASURED MOVES

At the first Cabinet meeting in his new office at 'Seva Teerth', Prime Minister Narendra Modi expressed unhappiness at recent controversies in the Union Education Ministry. He felt there should be stocktaking by all ministries of reforms introduced since the start of his third term. Subsequently, the Cabinet Secretary wrote to private secretaries of ministers asking for a review of reforms introduced since 2024. Many read in Modi's remarks an indication of a likely Cabinet reshuffle. It was noticeable that, later, ministers with dual portfolios were spending far more time in offices of their additional portfolios and interacting with officials.

But, it is not Modi's style to rush into action and give the impression of bowing to pressure. If ministerial changes are made, it will not be immediately. After the Epstein papers, Petroleum Minister Hardeep Puri, whose Rajya Sabha term expires by year end, has been facing the heat. Also, the RSS is upset with the UGC's equity norms, released last month, to check discrimination on campus, which the Supreme Court has since stayed. The BJP apprehends that upper castes will feel alienated if the measures are adopted. Some attribute the UGC's drafting misjudgment to the fact that Dharmendra Pradhan's Education Ministry does not have an RSS representative to "vet" sensitive decisions. Pradhan, however, remains a favourite of Modi, Shah and a section of the RSS and is unlikely to be dropped.

## LUTYENS'S SIGNATURE STAYS

It is a moot point whether the bust of Sir Edwin Lutyens was removed from the Rashtrapati Bhavan, the magnificent building he designed, because of his alleged racist views on Indians and his "belittling" of Indian architecture and culture, or the fact that the term 'Lutyens Delhi' has come to personify the Capital's elite, with a Nehruvian mindset, who dominated politics, culture and the liberal narrative in Delhi in the pre-Modi days. Those considered part of 'Lutyens Delhi' are understandably among those incensed over the bust's removal. Interestingly, few are aware that Lutyens left his distinctive signature on Rashtrapati Bhavan in the form of a unique roshandan (skylight) designed in the shape of his spectacles. The window is discreetly located in the corridor leading to the Press Secretary's office.

Incidentally the real colonial relic — visible during Giani Zail Singh's presidential tenure — is the throne of King George VI, cleverly camouflaged with an Ashoka Chakra brass canopy and converted into the President's chair. One wonders if it still remains.

## SPEAKING OF WHICH

Political parties should be queuing up to recruit Neha Singh, Galgotia University's head of communications. Singh may have been left holding the bag after a Chinese-made robotic dog was presented as "developed" by the university, at the recent global AI Impact Summit in Delhi, but what left viewers awed was that she remained unabashed and exuded confidence despite the major goof-up. Singh explained it away with the quip "Your 6 can be my 9", with many seeing in an Amitabh Bachchan line from an old film, and asserted that in her "enthusiasm and speaking in a jiffy", she might not have "come across as very eloquent".

Singh is clearly a believer in the maxim originally expounded by British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli, "Never explain, never complain". With the BJP often ill-served by some shrill spokespersons on TV, whose defence is often whataboutery or verbal slanging, the absence of the late Arun Jaitley, the unofficial media adviser to Narendra Modi, even before Modi became the PM, is sorely felt. Jaitley seldom made the mistake of defending the indefensible. As a brilliant lawyer, he knew how to frame his arguments depending on his audience and never strayed far from the truth, rather deflecting.

## BLUE DIARY

When former Chhattisgarh CM Bhupesh Baghel's son Chaitanya was first jailed in September last year for alleged involvement in the state's liquor scandal, his family viewed it as a badge of honour. Three generations of Baghels have been imprisoned in Raipur Central Jail, and later freed by courts. But when Chaitanya's case was taken over by the ED and he failed to get bail, he was no longer gung ho. Last month, he finally secured bail, though there is a buzz that his statement to the authorities could have implicated a Congress high-up in Delhi. In political circles, the term 'Blue Diary' is being talked about by some in the same manner as the 'Jain Diary' case of two decades ago, which had created noise for allegedly recording payments to political figures.



**HISTORY HEADLINE**  
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**I**N DECEMBER 1954, passion was running high in the Lok Sabha. The House was debating the first-ever resolution to remove a Speaker, G V Mavalankar, from office.

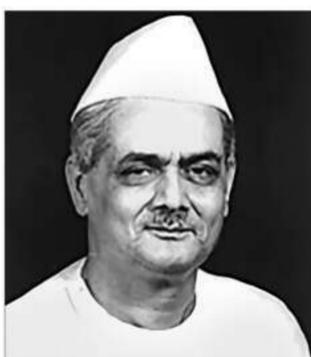
Dr N B Khare, a member representing Gwalior, whose voters had elected him on a Hindu Mahasabha ticket, was one of the resolution's signatories. Highlighting his grievances against the Speaker, the impassioned Khare, a 72-year-old who was a doctor and had a long legislative career, accused Mavalankar of "mental murder, albeit effected non-violently". He then raised some papers to show the House his rejected questions and stated, "Here are about two dozen death warrants of my poor dry dead questions. Not one was admitted in this Session."

Parliament will witness a similar debate on March 9, when MPs are likely to discuss and vote on the motion to remove Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla. Opposition MPs have given a notice for the removal of the Speaker "because of the blatantly partisan manner in which he has been conducting the business of the Lok Sabha..."

The office of the Speaker can be traced to the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms and the Government of India Act of 1919. These provided that the central legislative assembly would be presided over by a president, the first appointed and subsequent ones elected by the assembly members. The law provided that the elected presidents could be removed by the members through a vote.

In 1925, assembly members elected Vithalbai Patel as their president. After his election, Patel declared, "From this moment, I cease to be a party man. I belong to no party. I belong to all parties."

Ibrahim Rahimtoola and Shanmukham Chetty occupied the office from 1930 to 1935. Then came Abdul Rahim, a noted lawyer, who served for a decade until 1945. He was



G V Mavalankar, India's first Speaker

the first assembly president against whom a member moved a motion for removal, which was rejected on technical grounds.

And then in 1946, Mavalankar stood for election to the post. Before coming to the national legislature, Mavalankar had been president of the Ahmedabad municipality and then presided over the Bombay Legislative Assembly.

Mavalankar's 1946 election was close. Everyone expected the government's nominee to win by a few votes. Dr Khare recalls in his memoir that he helped sway two members to vote in favour of Mavalankar. In the end, Mavalankar won by three votes.

Mavalankar's 1946 election marked the start of his stint as presiding officer at the national level. He became the bridge between the pre- and post-independence legislature, and his colleagues in the first Lok Sabha elected him as their Speaker in 1952.

He laid the foundations for India's independent legislature. He tried to ensure that Parliament held the government accountable and secured the independence of its secretariat. He established new committees and healthy conventions by appointing Opposition members as chairpersons.

And when the government issued ordinances, bypassing Parliament, he told PM Nehru, "...We, as the first Lok Sabha, carry a responsibility of laying down traditions. It is not a question of present personnel in the Government but a question of preced-

ents; and if this Ordinance issuing is not limited by convention, only to extreme and very urgent cases, the result may be that, in future, the Government may go on issuing Ordinances giving the Lok Sabha no option but to rubber-stamp the Ordinances."

However, the Opposition was critical of his refusal to admit their adjournment motions (a parliamentary device for discussing a particular issue rather than the scheduled business of the House). Mavalankar was of the opinion that, after independence, the government was responsible to the legislature, and MPs should utilise the rules available to hold the government to account. His rejection of adjournment motions drew the ire of Opposition MPs, who eventually moved a resolution for his removal.

SS More, a first-time member who had stood against Mavalankar in the 1952 Speaker election, started the debate. He framed the debate as one of parliamentary rights and government accountability. He said that the Speaker's rejection of questions and adjournment motions restricted the Opposition's ability to hold the government accountable. He ended his speech by reminding PM Nehru that "democracy cannot be developed by developing a sort of partisan spirit — a fanatical partisan spirit — which is not proper according to the fundamental concepts of democracy..."

Dr Khare, who had a run-in with the Speaker a few days earlier, was more direct. He called the Speaker's decisions arbitrary, designed to suppress the revelation of facts unfavourable to the government.

PM Nehru defended Mavalankar and called the Opposition's motion "vicious" and the Opposition's charges "an exhibition of incompetence, frivolity and lack of substance". He reminded the House that the motion of removal is an extraordinary procedure, justified under extremely grave circumstances. He said that the wording used in the motion was "a gross abuse of one's intelligence" and "to ask anybody in the House to support this is to consider that man utterly lacking in intelligence".

Lok Sabha MPs then defeated the motion to remove Speaker Mavalankar by a voice vote.

*The writer looks at issues through a legislative lens and works at PRS Legislative Research*

# Long live the Liberal Arts

**A**MONG THE many upheavals currently occurring on Earth is that artificial intelligence (AI) is allegedly rewriting the future of work. Will we be contending with the terrifying new reality that computer systems will take over coveted careers in software engineering, leaving the brightest students twiddling their thumbs? Or, is the buzz around AI merely a convenient justification for layoffs? The answer, most likely, lies somewhere in between — AI use is increasing, but a Terminator-like situation where machines are in charge is still really far away.

On the bright side, as AI threatens to make the value of technical skills questionable, it's a shot at freedom for all those reluctantly aspiring engineers forced into IT tuition factories in Kota, often driven to suicide by ambitious and clueless parents. In India at least, we've been a brutally optimisation oriented society — getting the best ROI means studying specifically those subjects which improves one's financial prospects. That's life. An understandable

desire for upward mobility means what one wants to do generally comes second to what one has to do. Since it's turning out that going forward, the money doesn't necessarily lie in hard skill degrees — realistically, getting rich will require a combination of tech expertise and an education in the humanities — it'll be a welcome relief for many that their work life can expand to include softer interests. There's something to cheer that studying Literature, Philosophy and History will no longer be written off with contemptuous scorn because the demand for expertise in the social sciences will rise.

In our heads, when we think about the university experience, the engineering student is gloomily grinding away over complicated Maths formulas while the liberal arts major is dreamily reading *Crime and Punishment* under a leafy tree in a college lawn. Popular culture supports this reductive fallacy; for example, in the eminently watchable romcom *Notting Hill*, the protagonist is the quintessential English



**ON THE LOOSE**  
BY LEHER KALA

major; a self-deprecating, struggling under-achiever who runs a niche bookstore. Predictably, the finale reveals what most of us want from life — a relaxing afternoon with a book in a beautiful garden, in the presence of a loved one. There is something idyllic, even enchanted, about savouring verse, which is maybe why it isn't taken seriously. And indeed, the cultivation of the mind, or developing perspective through examining the past has never been considered the surefire route to CEO.

It's true, there are unlikely to be recruiters breaking down the door after one graduates from studying classical literature of the 15th century, but by all accounts, coders today feel similarly bereft and anxious about employment too. Perhaps, the reordering of professional hierarchy topping STEM from its exalted, numero uno position will allow students to take a broader view of life, and the world at large will have to abandon the prevailing, strictly utilitarian attitude to education. Two problems for the humanities are that writing

better, or thinking more deeply doesn't have immediate, quantifiable benefits; and, the notional timeframe for success has shortened. A lot of this has to do with seeing random "influencers" online (whom we'd like to write off as two bit flash-in-the-pan but that's not necessarily true).

People in their 20s with questionable talent (but with grand chutzpah) are holding forth on Instagram and YouTube on everything from crypto to fashion to trading, working out their own hours and their own terms, and making money off their followers. How long this lasts is a different matter, but the very fact that this is a viable option has rendered the traditional career ladder obsolete. No one's planning their lives thinking of getting a raise every year and changing designations. The youth today are more cynical, but also wiser; forced to reimagine their futures, they know life revolves around money; but they'd rather go to work happy.

*The writer is director, Hutkay Films*

# India bends to world's policeman



ACROSS THE AISLE  
BY P CHIDAMBARAM

**A**NOTHER WAR has broken out. Israel is the provocateur. The United States is the executioner. Israel has convinced President Donald Trump that Iran has, or has nearly completed developing, nuclear weapons and has laid out plans to threaten the United States. However, *The Wall Street Journal* has reported that US officials with access to classified information have flat-out denied the alleged threats as unsubstantiated. Yet, Mr Trump has launched a full-scale war against Iran in partnership with Israel.

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When news came of the death of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, my first reaction was to celebrate. The death of all tyrants should be celebrated. If only because for a few blissful moments a heaviness seems to lift from the world. So, in cities across the world, Iranians celebrated the death of a man who destroyed the political and economic foundation of their country. Many of those who celebrated have been forced to leave their homeland as political refugees. Many have seen friends and family members tortured to death or executed by the Ayatollah's revolutionary guards. Women's voices were heard loudest in support of sisters and friends blinded or killed for the 'sin' of showing a few strands of hair. So why is it that Indian Muslims reacted so differently?

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After rage against his rule erupted in January, he unleashed the might of his theocratic and military empire upon his own people. Young men and women, some barely out of their teens, were gunned down in public squares. Women were thrown into jail and, according to unconfirmed reports, many were raped.

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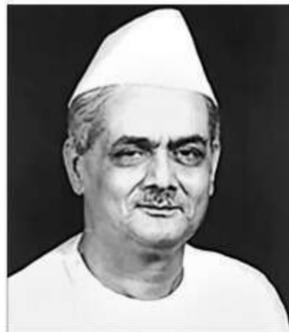
Dr N B Khare, a member representing Gwalior, whose voters had elected him on a Hindu Mahasabha ticket, was one of the resolution's signatories. Highlighting his grievances against the Speaker, the impassioned Khare, a 72-year-old who was a doctor and had a long legislative career, accused Mavalankar of "mental murder, albeit effected non-violently". He then raised some papers to show the House his rejected questions and stated, "Here are about two dozen dead warrants of my poor dry dead questions. Not one was admitted in this Session."

Parliament will witness a similar debate on March 9, when MPs are likely to discuss and vote on the motion to remove Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla. Opposition MPs have given a notice for the removal of the Speaker "because of the blatantly partisan manner in which he has been conducting the business of the Lok Sabha..."

The office of the Speaker can be traced to the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms and the Government of India Act of 1919. These provided that the central legislative assembly would be presided over by a president, the first appointed and subsequent ones elected by the assembly members. The law provided that the elected presidents could be removed by the members through a vote.

In 1925, assembly members elected Vithalbai Patel as their president. After his election, Patel declared, "From this moment, I cease to be a party man. I belong to no party. I belong to all parties."

Ibrahim Rahimtoola and Shanmukham Chetty occupied the office from 1930 to 1935. Then came Abdur Rahim, a noted lawyer, who served for a decade until 1945. He was



G V Mavalankar, India's first Speaker

the first assembly president against whom a member moved a motion for removal, which was rejected on technical grounds.

And then in 1946, Mavalankar stood for election to the post. Before coming to the national legislature, Mavalankar had been president of the Ahmedabad municipality and then presided over the Bombay Legislative Assembly.

Mavalankar's 1946 election was close. Everyone expected the government's nominee to win by a few votes. Dr Khare recalls in his memoir that he helped sway two members to vote in favour of Mavalankar. In the end, Mavalankar won by three votes.

Mavalankar's 1946 election marked the start of his stint as presiding officer at the national level. He became the bridge between the pre- and post-independence legislature, and his colleagues in the first Lok Sabha elected him as their Speaker in 1952.

He laid the foundations for India's independent legislature. He tried to ensure that Parliament held the government accountable and secured the independence of its secretariat. He established new committees and healthy conventions by appointing Opposition members as chairpersons.

And when the government issued ordinances, bypassing Parliament, he told PM Nehru, "...We, as the first Lok Sabha, carry a responsibility of laying down traditions. It is not a question of present personnel in the Government but a question of preced-

ents; and if this Ordinance issuing is not limited by convention, only to extreme and very urgent cases, the result may be that, in future, the Government may go on issuing Ordinances giving the Lok Sabha no option but to rubber-stamp the Ordinances."

However, the Opposition was critical of his refusal to admit their adjournment motions (a parliamentary device for discussing a particular issue rather than the scheduled business of the House). Mavalankar was of the opinion that, after Independence, the government was responsible to the legislature, and MPs should utilise the rules available to hold the government to account. His rejection of adjournment motions drew the ire of Opposition MPs, who eventually moved a resolution for his removal.

SS More, a first-time member who had stood against Mavalankar in the 1952 Speaker election, started the debate. He framed the debate as one of parliamentary rights and government accountability. He said that the Speaker's rejection of questions and adjournment motions restricted the Opposition's ability to hold the government accountable. He ended his speech by reminding PM Nehru that "democracy cannot be developed by developing a sort of partisan spirit — a fanatical partisan spirit — which is not proper according to the fundamental concepts of democracy..."

Dr Khare, who had a run-in with the Speaker a few days earlier, was more direct. He called the Speaker's decisions arbitrary, designed to suppress the revelation of facts unfavourable to the government.

PM Nehru defended Mavalankar and called the Opposition's motion "vicious" and the Opposition's charges "an exhibition of incompetence, frivolity and lack of substance". He reminded the House that the motion of removal is an extraordinary procedure, justified under extremely grave circumstances. He said that the wording used in the motion was "a gross abuse of one's intelligence" and "to ask anybody in the House to support this is to consider that man utterly lacking in intelligence".

Lok Sabha MPs then defeated the motion to remove Speaker Mavalankar by a voice vote.

# Long live the Liberal Arts

**A**MONG THE many upheavals currently occurring on Earth is that artificial intelligence (AI) is allegedly rewriting the future of work. Will we be contending with the terrifying new reality that computer systems will take over coveted careers in software engineering, leaving the brightest students twiddling their thumbs? Or, is the buzz around AI merely a convenient justification for layoffs? The answer, most likely, lies somewhere in between — AI use is increasing, but a Terminator-like situation where machines are in charge is still really far away.

On the bright side, as AI threatens to make the value of technical skills questionable, it's a shot at freedom for all those reluctantly aspiring engineers forced into IIT tuition factories in Kota, often driven to suicide by ambitious and clueless parents. In India at least, we've been a brutally optimisation oriented society — getting the best ROI means studying specifically those subjects which improves one's financial prospects. That's life. An understandable

desire for upward mobility means what one wants to do generally comes second to what one has to do. Since it's turning out that going forward, the money doesn't necessarily lie in hard skill degrees — realistically, getting rich will require a combination of tech expertise and an education in the humanities — it'll be a welcome relief for many that their work life can expand to include softer interests. There's something to cheer that studying Literature, Philosophy and History will no longer be written off with contemptuous scorn because the demand for expertise in the social sciences will rise.

In our heads, when we think about the university experience, the engineering student is gloomily grinding away over complicated Maths formulas while the liberal arts major is dreamily reading *Crime and Punishment* under a leafy tree in a college lawn. Popular culture supports this reductive fallacy; for example, in the eminently watchable romcom *Notting Hill*, the protagonist is the quintessential English



ON THE LOOSE  
BY LEHER KALA

major; a self-deprecating, struggling under-achiever who runs a niche bookstore. Predictably, the finale reveals what most of us want from life — a relaxing afternoon with a book in a beautiful garden, in the presence of a loved one. There is something idyllic, even enchanted, about savouring work, which is maybe why it isn't taken seriously. And indeed, the cultivation of the mind, or developing perspective through examining the past has never been considered the surefire route to CEO.

It's true, there are unlikely to be recruiters breaking down the door after one graduates from studying classical literature of the 15th century, but by all accounts, coders today feel similarly bereft and anxious about employment too. Perhaps, the reordering of professional hierarchy topping STEM from its exalted, numero uno position will allow students to take a broader view of life, and the world at large will have to abandon the prevailing, strictly utilitarian attitude to education. Two problems for the humanities are that writing

better, or thinking more deeply doesn't have immediate, quantifiable benefits; and, the notional timeframe for success has shortened. A lot of this has to do with seeing random "influencers" online (whom we'd like to write off as two bit flash-in-the-pan but that's not necessarily true).

People in their 20s with questionable talent (but with grand chutzpah) are holding forth on Instagram and YouTube on everything from crypto to fashion to trading, working out their own hours and their own terms, and making money off their followers. How long this lasts is a different matter, but the very fact that this is a viable option has rendered the traditional career ladder obsolete. No one's planning their lives thinking of getting a raise every year and changing designations. The youth today are more cynical, but also wiser; forced to reimagine their futures, they know life revolves around money; but they'd rather go to work happy.

The writer is director, Hutkay Films

## War Powers

When the United States enters another West Asia conflict, an old constitutional question returns: who decides when America goes to war? The latest confrontation with Iran has again placed that question squarely before the United States Congress - and Congress has chosen, at least for now, not to challenge the President's authority.

A vote in the United States Senate sought to limit the ability of President Donald Trump to continue military operations against Iran without explicit congressional approval. The measure failed along largely partisan lines. The immediate result is straightforward: the administration retains broad operational freedom as the conflict unfolds.

Yet the deeper significance lies in the continuing ambiguity of American war powers. The Constitution assigns Congress the authority to declare war, but modern conflicts rarely begin with formal declarations. Presidents from both parties have relied instead on executive authority, supplemented by broad authorisations passed in moments of crisis.

The most influential of these remains the Authorisation for Use of Military Force adopted after the September 11 attacks. Over the past two decades it has been invoked to justify operations far beyond its original context. Successive administrations have interpreted it as a flexible legal foundation for military action across West Asia.

This recurring pattern reflects a broader shift in how the United States conducts war. Military engagements today often begin as limited strikes, counter-terrorism operations, or defensive responses rather than formal declarations of war. That ambiguity allows presidents to act quickly, while leaving Congress to debate the legal framework only after military action has already begun.

Concern over this expanding executive latitude led Congress in 1973 to enact the War Powers Resolution after the long and divisive experience of the Vietnam War. The law requires presidents to notify Congress quickly after initiating hostilities and limits how long forces can remain engaged without legislative authorisation.

In practice, however, the statute has rarely compelled a president to halt a military campaign. Administrations routinely dispute its constitutional basis, while Congress often hesitates to assert its authority during an unfolding conflict.

The latest Senate vote reflects that pattern. Lawmakers who supported the resolution argued that decisions involving sustained hostilities should rest with Congress as well as the White House. Those who opposed it countered that restricting the president in the midst of a confrontation would send a signal of division to adversaries and uncertainty to American forces. Both arguments reflect enduring tensions in the American constitutional system. War demands speed and unity of command, but democracy demands accountability.

For now, Congress has chosen caution over confrontation with the executive branch. Whether that calculation holds may depend on how the conflict with Iran evolves. If the fighting expands or drags on, pressure in Washington to revisit the balance of war powers could quickly return. The debate, in other words, has not been settled - only postponed.

## Kaziranga Model

In conservation, success stories are rare enough that they often sound improbable. Yet in Assam, the recovery of the greater one-horned rhinoceros at Kaziranga National Park demonstrates that determined policy and relentless enforcement can rescue a species that once seemed destined for decline. A century ago, the rhinoceros that has become the emblem of Assam hovered near extinction. At the beginning of the twentieth century barely a dozen survived in the marshes along the Brahmaputra. Today the population has climbed into the thousands across the state, with Kaziranga holding the world's largest concentration of the species. The turnaround did not happen by accident. It required a deliberate shift in how wildlife protection was conceived and enforced.

The modern phase of that shift began roughly a decade ago when rhino poaching surged sharply. Horns were fetching astronomical prices in international illegal markets, driven by demand in parts of East and Southeast Asia where myths about their medicinal value persist. Faced with the possibility that decades of conservation gains could unravel, the Assam government adopted a zero-tolerance strategy. Forest guards were armed, intelligence networks strengthened, and patrols intensified across the park's grasslands and wetlands.

Technology was added to the traditional ranger's toolkit. Drone surveillance, digital patrol tracking systems originally developed for tiger reserves, and a dense network of anti-poaching camps allowed authorities to monitor vulnerable zones far more closely than before. The message to organised poaching syndicates became unmistakable: Kaziranga was no longer easy terrain.

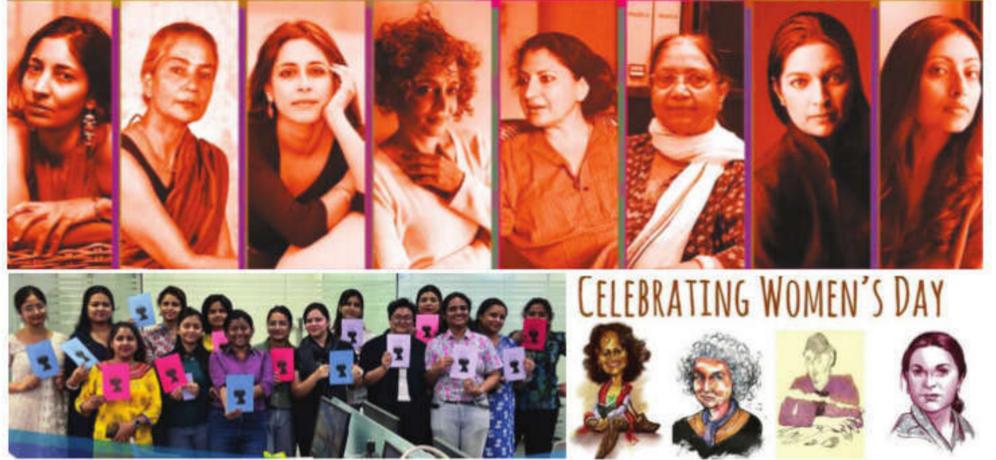
Leadership also mattered. Officials in Assam's forest department, including Indian Forest Service officers such as Sonali Ghosh, pushed for a conservation model that combined strict enforcement with public engagement. Women forest guards - popularly called "Van Durgas" - were recruited and trained alongside male counterparts, reinforcing the sense that protecting the rhino was a collective mission rather than a specialised bureaucratic task.

Political endorsement amplified the effort. Visits by Prime Minister Narendra Modi drew national attention to Kaziranga and reinforced the rhino's status as a symbol of Assam's natural heritage. The results are striking. Rhino poaching has fallen dramatically, and recent years have recorded no killings at all. For conservationists accustomed to grim statistics about endangered wildlife, that outcome is extraordinary.

Yet success has created its own challenge. As rhino numbers grow, Kaziranga's landscape - bounded by the Brahmaputra and human settlements - faces the risk of ecological overcrowding. Conservation planners are increasingly discussing translocating animals to other protected areas such as Manas National Park to create new populations and reduce pressure on the park's habitat. Kaziranga, therefore, offers more than a story of recovery. It provides a template for how political will, scientific management, and public support can converge to protect wildlife. The next task is to ensure that the success of that model does not become its limitation.

# Her Words, Our Worlds

*Celebrating women in literature is not only about authorship; it is also about representation. The evolution of female characters tells its own story of cultural change. Once confined to archetypes - the dutiful wife, the tragic heroine, the temptress - women in fiction now inhabit roles as complex and contradictory as real life. From detectives and antiheroes to scientists and revolutionaries, contemporary literature reflects a widening horizon of possibility*



Every year, the world pauses to celebrate the social, economic, cultural and political achievements of women on International Women's Day (IWD). It is also a moment to reflect on the work still to be done. Nowhere is that reflection more profound - or more enduring - than in literature. Across centuries and continents, women writers have challenged conventions, redefined storytelling, and insisted that women's lives, inner worlds, and ambitions belong at the centre of the intellectual and creative history of the human race. For much of literary history, women were present in stories but absent from authorship. When they did write, they often did so under pseudonyms or within constrained genres. Yet even in restrictive eras, their voices found ways to resonate. In 19th-century England, novelists crafted works that subtly but powerfully critiqued the social and economic limitations imposed on women. Austen's keen observations of marriage and money exposed the transactional realities facing women without fortune, while Brontë's passionate heroines demanded emotional and intellectual equality. At the same time, Mary Shelley could transcend the limitations of women-centric plots to author one of the most powerfully written novels in world literature, Frankenstein.

Across the Atlantic, a writer offered readers in Little Women a portrait of sisterhood and self-determination that continues to inspire. Jo March's refusal to conform to expectations was more than a character trait; it was a declaration of independence. Such characters became early templates for readers hungry for representations of women as thinkers, dreamers, and creators. Even in the Indian context, Rassundari Debi could go beyond the call of her domestic duties to pen an autobiography, 'Amar Jibon' - My Life, in 1876, which redefined not only women's literature but the very basis of autobiographical writing.

The 20th century witnessed a seismic shift as women began to claim greater authority over their narratives. Few works encapsulate this transformation more vividly than A Room of One's Own by Virginia Woolf. The work is an extended essay that argued for women's financial independence and private space as prerequisites for artistic creation. Woolf's assertion that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" remains a rallying cry. It reframed literature not as a neutral field of talent, but as one shaped by access, privilege, and gender.

Meanwhile, writers like Toni Morrison expanded the scope of whose stories were told and how. Morrison's novels centred on Black women's experiences with poetic intensity and unflinching honesty, confronting histories of enslavement, trauma, and resilience. Her Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993 was not only a personal milestone but also a recognition of voices long marginalized in the literary canon. Latin America, Africa, and Asia have likewise produced formidable literary figures whose works interrogate gender, tradition, and power. Nigerian author Chimamanda Adichie bridges fiction and feminist discourse, exploring identity and inequality in novels and essays that resonate globally. In South Asia, authors such as Arundhati Roy have intertwined literary craft with activism. Roy's fiction and essays challenge political orthodoxies while foregrounding women's agency in turbulent contexts. Similarly, Egyptian writer Ahdaf Soueif confronted taboos around sexuality, religion, and patriarchy, insisting that literature could be both art and instrument of liberation.

Yet celebrating women in literature is not only about authorship; it is also about representation. The evolution of female characters tells its own story of cultural change. Once confined to archetypes - the dutiful wife, the tragic heroine, the temptress

- women in fiction now inhabit roles as complex and contradictory as real life. From detectives and antiheroes to scientists and revolutionaries, contemporary literature reflects a widening horizon of possibility.

Children's and young adult literature, too, has been transformed with powerfully crafted women characters.

Characters like Hermione Granger in the Harry Potter series demonstrate intellect and courage as central traits rather than exceptions. Meanwhile, authors across genres are increasingly attentive to intersectionality, portraying women whose identities are shaped not only by gender but also by race, class, sexuality, disability, and migration.

Despite these gains, disparities persist. Studies of publishing trends continue to show gender imbalances in bylines, review coverage, and literary prizes. The conversation sparked by initiatives such as the VIDA Count - Women in Literary Arts, which tracks representation in major literary publications, underscores that equality in literature - like equality in society - is an ongoing project.

Digital platforms have opened new avenues for women writers, democratizing access to audiences and bypassing traditional gatekeepers. Social media, independent presses, and online literary journals have enabled emerging voices to find readerships that might once have been unreachable. At the same time, these spaces can expose women to disproportionate harassment, reminding us that progress often arrives with new challenges.

On this IWD, the significance of women in literature lies not only in past triumphs but also in future potential. Literature shapes

how societies imagine themselves. When women write and are read, they expand the boundaries of empathy and understanding. They complicate narratives that have long centered male experience as universal and female experience as peripheral. Importantly, the call to celebrate women in literature is not a call for segregation but for inclusion. The goal is not a separate shelf but a shared canon that recognizes excellence wherever it appears. It is about ensuring that a young reader, browsing a library or scrolling through an online bookstore, encounters a tapestry of voices that reflect the diversity of human experience. The act of reading itself can be transformative. To read a woman's story - told in her own words - is to step into a consciousness shaped by distinct pressures and possibilities. It is to witness the alchemy by which personal experience becomes art. And it is to acknowledge that the literary landscape, once narrow and exclusionary, has been irrevocably enriched by women's contributions. As celebrations and panel discussions unfold worldwide on IWD, bookstores and libraries often curate displays highlighting women authors. These gestures, though symbolic, serve as entry points into deeper engagement. They invite readers not only to honour established icons but also to discover emerging writers.

The story of women in literature is, ultimately, a story of persistence. It is about women who wrote when discouraged, published when doubted, and imagined when told their imaginations were secondary. It is about readers who recognized themselves in those pages and dared to envision broader futures. In marking this day, we do more than celebrate individual achievements. We affirm a principle: that literature thrives when all voices are heard. As long as stories are told, women will not merely inhabit them - they will author them, redefine them, and ensure that the narrative of humanity is richer, more inclusive, and truer.



RUDRASHIS DATTA

The writer is Assistant Professor in English, Pritilata Waddekar Mahavidyalaya, Nadia

## The Daily Star

# Can Family Card reset our social protection system?

The social protection system in Bangladesh has always carried two truths together. On paper, it is large, diverse, and politically important. On the ground, it is often messy, fragmented, and sometimes unfair. The tension is back under the spotlight with the government's new Family Card initiative, scheduled to begin as a four-month pilot from March 10, covering 6,500 families in 14 upazilas, each receiving Tk 2,500 per month through mobile wallets or bank accounts.

Supporters see it as a bold step, even historic. Critics fear it may simply become one bigger programme layered on top of an already crowded landscape. The real question is not whether the Family Card is good or bad in principle; it is whether the country can use this moment to address the deeper design and governance failures that have long held back social protection. Two features make this initiative politically

and economically significant. First, the scale being discussed is unprecedented. If the government eventually brings two crore families under monthly support, it would cost roughly Tk 5,000 crore per month, or around Tk 60,000 crore a year. It is a macro-level commitment that will shape fiscal choices for years.

Second, the architecture proposed goes beyond cash transfer. The draft guideline reportedly envisions a Dynamic Social Registry, integration of existing TCB cards, and a longer-term ambition of turning the Family Card into a universal social identity instrument by 2030, while pushing the social protection budget towards three percent of GDP by 2028. If that direction is real and implemented properly, it could address a core problem Bangladesh has struggled with for decades: a system that has grown in pieces rather

than as a coherent whole.

Bangladesh currently runs more than 100 social safety net programmes across 25 ministries, with a budget allocation reported at roughly two percent of GDP. Too often, it produces duplication, inconsistent eligibility rules, administrative waste, and room for discretion at the local level. As a result, some households receive multiple benefits while similarly poor households receive none. While the draft guideline notes that 22-25 percent of the actual poor remain excluded, many studies indicate that the exclusion error could be more than twice this figure. When exclusion errors are that high, the moral argument for reform becomes as compelling as the technical one. Three aspects deserve credit because they align with what serious reform requires.

First, using the household as the delivery unit. Many vulnerabilities are shared within the family: food insecurity, health

shocks, rent pressure, and job loss. A family-based instrument can reduce the common problem of "one person, one benefit" designs, which miss the broader dependency structure.

Second, making women the primary recipients. The plan is to issue cards in the name of the mother or female head of household. This matters. There is strong global evidence that transfers routed to women more often translate into spending on food, health, and children's needs, and it can strengthen bargaining power inside the household.

Third, attempting a data-driven selection mechanism. The proposed use of Proxy Means Test (PMT) scoring, door-to-door data collection, verification by social services staff, and QR-coded cards signals an intention to limit patronage. But design intentions do not automatically become delivery outcomes. That is where the real test begins.

Letters To The Editor | ✉ editor@thestatesman.com

## Inevitable

Sir, Please refer to today's report "Nitish to quit as Bihar CM, to move to Rajya Sabha". Undoubtedly, the inevitable was set to happen in Bihar. Janata Dal (United) chief Nitish Kumar, who took oath as the chief minister for a record 10th time less than four months ago, is on course to vacate the coveted chair as he will contest the upcoming Rajya Sabha polls. His victory, which is a foregone conclusion because of the ruling alliance's comfortable majority in the Assembly, will bring to an end his two-decade-long journey as the CM.

In all probability, his successor will be from the BJP, which emerged as the single largest party in the November 2025 Assembly elections. The JD(U) had put up a strong show, which helped Mr Kumar stay in the saddle, but it seemed to be only a matter of time before he would step down - voluntarily or otherwise. Bihar is the only Hindi heartland

state where the saffron party has not had a chief minister of its own so far. There is speculation that Mr Kumar's son, Nishant Kumar, a rookie in active politics, will join the new government as deputy CM. However, with the BJP going all out to tighten its grip on power in Bihar, the JD(U) is poised to play second fiddle. There is bound to be discontent among JD(U) leaders over the power imbalance. The challenge for the ageing Nitish Kumar would be to keep his flock together and ensure that his party does not cede too much ground to its allies.

Yours, etc., Khokan Das, Kolkata, 6 March.

## Package

Sir, A honcho of BJP and Central dispensation has promised to the Bengal electorate that after "assuming power" in the state, "Special package for women's empowerment and safety" would be promptly introduced, citing

the gangrape-murder in RG Kar hospital, Kolkata. While offering him whole-hearted thanks, may I humbly ask whether such a "special package" has already been introduced in Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Odisha, Manipur, Bihar, Delhi and Haryana from where spine-chilling sexual atrocities regularly get reported?

Yours, etc., Kajal Chatterjee, Sodepur, 5 March.

## Built for eruption

Sir, Apropos "Can America's institutions survive Trump" published today, Trump's presidency has stretched the American constitutional order, exploiting antique statutes and emergency powers designed for rare crises.

Yet the American republic was built for such eruption. Jackson flouted the Court, Lincoln stretched wartime powers, Nixon tested the limits of secrecy and surveillance.

Each episode ended not in autocracy, but in institutional correction: judicial pushback, legislative reform, and public recalibration of norms. The system would bend, painfully maybe, but retained majesty. The fervour of the MAGA base, like all leader-centric movements, is tethered to a personality, not to the pole star. Emotion dissipates; structures persist. Courts endure beyond presidents, Congress beyond electoral waves and federalism beyond factions. Charismatic mobilisation, across history, has ever been transient. If the Trump interlude leaves a legacy, it may be salutary: tighter emergency statutes, sharper oversight, and a polity more lively and alert to constitutional fragility. Democracies are seldom known to perish from tumult, but from somnolence and worse, apathy. Beware the Oracle! Hubris is ever destined to be mortal, but an ingrained Constitutional ethos is not.

Yours, etc., R Narayanan, Navi Mumbai, 24 February.

# 'Hallucinating' AI is now fighting real wars

BY INVITATION



JASPREET BINDRA

In Washington, a feud has erupted between the US Department of War and the AI company Anthropic, maker of the Claude model. The kerfuffle sounds like a classic corporate-state standoff, with Anthropic CEO Dario Amodei walking away from a \$200 million deal, refusing to drop contractual red lines that prohibited its AI. The Pentagon labelled the company a "supply-chain risk," effectively barring contractors from using its technology in military work.

The dispute is not about money or performance issues, but about ethics and control. Anthropic insisted that its models cannot be used for mass domestic surveillance or fully autonomous weapons, while the Pentagon wants the right to deploy AI for 'all lawful purposes,' which presumably includes these. When the company refused to loosen those restrictions, the relationship collapsed, the Pentagon blacklisted the firm, and Sam Altman's OpenAI, seemingly less concerned about these issues, signed a deal the very same day.

The surprising twist in this story is that the model at the centre of the dispute, Claude, has reportedly already been used in real military operations, including a US raid in Venezuela targeting President Nicolás Maduro, and is currently being used in Iran!

The most terrifying question is how can a Large Language Model (LLM), a technology famous for 'hallucinating' facts and being 'confidently wrong,' be trusted with the surgical precision required for high-stakes warfare? In matters of war and the fog surrounding it, no one will know exactly how. But, based on reporting, as well as the known capabilities of modern AI systems, several plausible uses emerge:

• **The Analyst:** Claude's long-context window allows it to ingest thousands of satellite images, SIGINT (signals intelligence), and open-source reports simultaneously. It doesn't just 'read' them, but produces vulnerability scores, condensing days of human analysis into minutes to perhaps identify which centrifuge hall at Natanz or Fordow, Iran's uranium enrichment sites, is most susceptible to a kinetic strike.

• **The Spotter:** In the operation that led to the capture of Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela, reports suggest AI was used to distinguish between real bunkers and elaborate decoys. In West Asia, the Times of Israel reports that US forces used Claude to assist in the lethal strike on Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. An LLM can process drone footage or satellite imagery and classify structures, distinguishing a bunker from a decoy, identifying vehicles, or spotting infrastructure hidden under camouflage.

• **The Wargamer:** Before a single drone entered Iranian airspace, the military likely ran thousands of Monte Carlo simulations, which use repeated random sam-



**GENERAL IN THE MACHINE:** Claude was reportedly used for Nicolás Maduro's capture and is being integrated into broader battle-management ecosystems like Palantir

pling to model uncertainty and estimate outcomes in complex systems. Claude can orchestrate these simulations rapidly, running probabilistic forecasts and producing scenario briefs for planners.

• **The Navigator:** AI is excellent at optimisation problems. It can assist with the logistical puzzle of modern warfare: routing drones, coordinating aircraft, avoiding radar coverage, and synchronising strikes.

• **The Copilot:** During an operation like the Iran strikes, commanders receive a firehose of information: sensor data, electronic warfare signals, and communications intercepts. An AI model can give real-time recommendations to pilots and commanders, suggesting instant adjustments to drone and flight patterns.

Popular imagination might envisage AI running wars like a sci-fi general, but the reality is far more prosaic. Militaries rarely rely on a single system to make battlefield decisions. What they deploy instead are complex decision-support ecosystems with image-analysis models, simulation software, logistics optimisers, radar algorithms, and human analysts working together. LLMs plug into that ecosystem as 'cognitive middleware' to summarise data, coordinate workflows, and help humans think faster. For example, Claude is being integrated into broader battle-management ecosystems like Palantir's Maven Smart System.

The direction of travel is unmistakable: We have entered the era of the AI Copilot for War. For centuries, the decisive advantage in war came from better artillery, faster aircraft, or more accurate missiles. Now, the race may increasingly be about who can think faster and more accurately with machines.

The dispute between Anthropic and DoW is only a precursor to a much larger philosophical question — not about whether machines can help us fight, but about how much of our morality we are willing to outsource to an algorithm. Because, in the wars of the future, the most powerful weapon may not be the missile or the drone, but the algorithm that decides where they go. Retrieval-Augmented Generation systems are meant to prevent the model from dreaming up facts and using only specific data provided by military sensors to contain hallucinations. Humans, too, remain in the loop, at least for now. AI suggests the target, but a human colonel still authorises the trigger. But the most dangerous part of a 'hallucinating' AI isn't that it makes a mistake, it is that no human may have the time to stop it. ■

Bindra is founder AI&amp;Beyond

# Trauma of displacement will always remain, especially for Manipur's kids

*Lakshmipriya Devi wears her BAFTA win lightly, speaking with the same disarming simplicity that runs through Boong, her debut feature that got her the award recently. The film, about a schoolboy's search for his missing father, wrapped up just weeks before ethnic clashes erupted in Manipur. Devi talks to Mohua Das about writing the story like her ten-year-old self, and the joy of finally doing something for her state*

■ **What has been the response to the win, especially in your hometown in Manipur?**

It has brought a lot of joy and people are looking forward to it. They've already started lining up at theatres. I'm excited for them to see it, especially the people from Moreh. Many Manipuri and Assamese films have gone to major festivals before, like Ishanou (1990) and Imagi Ningthem (1981). Both were written by my aunt, Binodini Devi, whom I admired greatly. She used to tell me, 'You never do anything for Manipur.' I wish she were alive today. She would have been very happy that I finally did something.

■ **In your speech you mentioned "internally displaced children, including the child actors in the film". How have they been affected?**

Not just the child actors in the film, but every child who has been displaced is handling it badly. Akhu (Chingangbam), the film's music director and line producer, works with children in camps, so happy I thought that was a great first step. I hope that, just like we worked together during the shoot, watching the film can bring some hope that we can still be the same. But maybe I am asking for too much. For me, it is simply important that a filmmaker has a voice. Otherwise what is the point of making a film?

■ **Larger tensions seep into the children's worlds in the film...**

The layer of tension you hear in words like 'go back' or 'foreigner' is there, but it is incidental. Children pick up what they see. Those words are already on the walls around them. You can be playing in your courtyard while something drastic is happening outside your gate. But the child's world remains their own and they are also the first to say sorry. It's just an underlying layer, not meant to highlight tensions. At the same time, what has happened in Manipur is still very close to me. As I grow older, humour is one of the ways I retreat and protect myself.

■ **Do you hope it will open up conversations?**

When the film had its limited release last year, people from the Kuki and Meitei communities sat next to each other in the halls, watched the film, and laughed together. I was sent pictures and videos. It made me so happy I thought that was a great first step. I hope that, just like we worked together during the shoot, watching the film can bring some hope that we can still be the same. But maybe I am asking for too much. For me, it is simply important that a filmmaker has a voice. Otherwise what is the point of making a film?

■ **You ended your speech by saying "no conflict should be formidable enough to destroy our superpower"**



# The Bibi bridge: India's Israel shift marks end to 75-year hesitation

RIGHT &amp; WRONG



SWAPAN DASGUPTA

PM Modi's personalised diplomacy has often invited snide asides from both the Opposition and those who now feel left out of New Delhi's rarefied strategic community. These attacks are par for the course and a feature of India's fractious democracy. However, the quantum of outrage over his short visit to Israel and its supposedly contagious impact on India's foreign policy went beyond the danger mark of the political Richter scale. The usual suspects did, quite predictably, protest too much. But to get the grande dame of the ancient regime to write an op-ed in her name was unusual. It suggested that the disquiet over Modi's bid to create a new normal was sufficient to warrant a more vigorous response than Priyanka Gandhi's symbolic photo-op with a Palestine tote bag. Indeed, if the street protests over the 'martyrdom' of Iran's

Supreme Leader acquire greater momentum in the 40-day mourning period, India may yet witness the Leader of Opposition accessorise his trademark white T-shirt with the Palestinian keffiyeh.

The overreaction was understandable. Apart from further cementing his personal ties with Benjamin Netanyahu, unquestionably the most impactful leader in Israel's 77-year history, Modi's visit had a significance that went beyond the strengthening of bilateral ties or even a growing military inter-dependence. The bonhomie with Bibi, the Knesset speech that witnessed a rare bout of bipartisanship in Israel, and India's emphatic solidarity with the Oct 7 victims of terrorism was clear proof that New Delhi had changed sides.

This may seem a facile and over-simplistic explanation of what our foreign policy calls 'strategic autonomy'. With its huge stakes in the Gulf and an age-old trading relationship growing in importance each year, it is unlikely that the India-Israel proximity would involve New Delhi parroting some fanciful versions of the Zionist dream. Nor is it

likely India will take a partisan stand in the present war involving Iran. Poking our nose in issues that were none of our business was a hallmark of Nehruvian grandstanding that successive govts have done away with. India wasn't pressured by preachy Europeans into ostracising Russia in the Ukraine war — a principled detachment that hasn't done India-EU relations any harm. Today's India isn't either taken for granted or totally disavowed.

The significance of Modi's Israel trip can be gauged from a detour into history. When the plan for the partition of Palestine (under a British Mandate since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire) was placed before the UN for consideration in 1947, there was an expectation from Jews that India would support the establishment of a new state of Israel. Their hope was based on India having been traditionally welcoming to persecuted Jews from different parts of the world. India was unique in having absolutely no record of anti-Semitism.

Lobbying the Indian govt was entrusted, among others, to Albert Einstein. The renowned scientist's

correspondence with Jawaharlal Nehru indicates that the pitch for the recognition of Israel was centred on moral considerations. Nehru replied that while "there was the greatest sympathy for the great suffering of the Jewish people" in India, "national policies are unfortunately selfish policies. Each country thinks of its own interest first."

What this "own interest" meant was spelt out bluntly by Sardar K M Panikkar, then an Indian delegate to the UN and a man whose diplomatic misjudgements were legendary. He told a Jewish lobbyist: "It is idle for you to try and convince us that the Jews have a case... We know it... But the point is simply this: For us to vote for the Jews means to vote against the Moslems. This is a conflict in which Islam is involved... We have 13 million Moslems in our midst... Therefore, we cannot do it." (quoted by historian Benny Morris in '1948: A History of the First Arab-Israeli War').

The repudiation of Israel for domestic, sectarian reasons was a pillar of Indian foreign policy for long. It was intimately linked to the unwavering

support for the pan-Arabism of President Nasser of Egypt and the other Ba'athist dictators who flaunted their socialist credentials. From the 1970s, Yasser Arafat developed a cosy relationship with the Gandhis. Narasimha Rao began the rectification process in 1992, but the progress was needlessly half-hearted. When Bibi welcomed Modi in 2017 with the question: "What took you so long?", he was hinting at India's plodding pace of change.

Modi's second visit, in the aftermath of the demography that has been constructed around Israel by the global fraternity of progressives, signals an advance in India's understanding of its self-interest. New Delhi's ties with Jerusalem will not be held hostage to domestic Muslim pressure. Likewise, India's relationship with the Arab countries will not be moulded by domestic political calculations. Both will be assessed on their own terms.

Mahatma Gandhi's cynical endorsement of the Khalifat movement was a monumental disaster for Indian nationalism. Such missteps must not be repeated. ■

# Bengaluru is stuck in a new jam. Can it beat back the AI monster?

THE UNDERAGE OPTIMIST



CHETAN BHAGAT

Bengaluru has another deep concern these days, apart from the insane traffic. The cornerstone companies of its IT sector — such as Infosys, TCS, Cognizant, and Wipro — are getting hammered in the stock market. In the last month alone, these companies have lost around 20% — a fifth of their value. Over the past year, these former market darlings have shed almost a third of their market capitalisation.

The reason? The elephant in every boardroom in the world today — AI, or artificial intelligence. AI is disrupting many sectors, if not all. However, recent progress in AI-based coding — where you simply type in plain English what you want the code to do, and the AI generates it in seconds — has shaken the foundations of our multi-billion-dollar, multi-million-employee Indian IT sector.

Heard of computer languages like C++, Java, or even the ancient COBOL which IT professionals take years to learn and perfect? Well, you don't necessarily need to know them anymore. AI does it faster, cheaper and perhaps even better. Not to mention, it doesn't need coffee, lunch breaks, vacations, and appraisals.

This is no longer the stuff of sci-fi. AI coding assistants like Claude Code, GitHub Copilot (built on OpenAI models), Tabnine, Amazon CodeWhisperer, and tools such as Replit AI, Qodo and Sourcegraph Cody are part of real development workflows today. These tools generate code from natural-language instructions, autocomplete logic blocks, suggest bug fixes, and even explain code.

For those unfamiliar with the IT-software-coding business, here's an analogy. Remember the days before smartphones? If you needed a picture, you went to a photo studio, hired a photographer or bought an expensive camera. You shot pictures on film rolls, then took them to a studio to get them developed. That ecosystem created multiple jobs — studio owners, photographers, film manufacturers, developers, and more. With the arrival of smartphone cameras, we are all photographers now. Forget photography, we are all videographers today. All those jobs have shrunk.

AI-based coding works similarly. Of course, you still need programming knowledge just as you need photography skills to take good pictures or video skills to create compelling content. But now, fewer highly skilled people who know how to use AI tools effectively are enough. Clients of these IT companies will likely reduce outsourced manpower and negotiate lower rates.

And here's the uncomfortable reality: Bengaluru and Gurugram are not building most of these AI coding platforms. Big Tech in the US is. Our advantage has long been cheap labour — which, incidentally, underpins not just IT but even many consumer internet businesses in India. But AI changes the labour-cost equation. If a US-based AI-trained engineer costs five times more but, with AI tools, can do the work of ten fresh Indian hires, it still makes economic sense for clients.



**LEAPING AHEAD:** China's robots performing synchronised kung fu show how far ahead it is in AI research and manufacturing

Meanwhile, countries like China are showcasing robots performing synchronised kung fu routines. When you watch those videos, you realise that advanced manufacturing, robotics, and foundational AI research have already moved elsewhere. And we are still debating billing rates.

India's IT sector contributes roughly 7% to GDP. Its decline may not devastate the economy, but it will have consequences. A sharp fall in IT services exports will affect our trade balance. Reduced job creation can lower consumer spending in major cities, potentially affecting real estate markets.

Is this a doomsday scenario? Perhaps. But the threat is real. Multi-billion-dollar companies don't lose a third of their value over baseless panic. We must also admit that India's IT sector — like many of our industries — is not known for deep innovation. Companies often prefer spending on "liaisoning" and navigating regulatory hurdles rather than investing heavily in research. Meanwhile, others are building trillion-dollar AI ecosystems. From IT and defence to robotics, and advanced manufacturing — everything is evolving. Those at the frontier will win. Labour arbitrage alone will not.

That said, the Indian IT sector has taken meaningful steps toward higher-end services. And this is not the first time doomsday predictions have surfaced. Many believed Indian IT would collapse after Y2K. Instead, it thrived. Similar fears arose with the rise of the internet and mobile apps. The companies survived and adapted.

However, each disruption is different. AI is unlike anything the Indian IT sector has faced before. It is faster, more scalable and directly attacks the core of the services model. Perhaps the future lies in a hybrid AI-human model. Just as hybrid engines in cars (internal combustion plus electric) have proven successful, maybe Bengaluru can offer a model where humans and AI work together. Humans still offer something AI cannot — accountability, empathy, and context. Also, let's be honest, clients sometimes want someone they can yell at. You can't exactly shout at an algorithm.

Will Bengaluru be able to fight back against the trillion-dollar AI monster? The optimist — and the India-loving person — in me says yes.

And fighting back the traffic monster? Well, that is a different story altogether. ■

# Five ways to reimagine Indian cities around women's labour and realities

BY INVITATION



ARUNA BHATTACHARYA



ANUTTAMA DASGUPTA

On most days, a woman in India does not experience the city as a neutral grid of roads and buildings. She experiences it as negotiation. She calculates lighting before distance. She chooses a certain parks after dusk. She memorises which metro exits open onto crowded streets and which lead to deserted service lanes. She plans her day not in straight lines but in loops — dropping a child at school, stopping at a pharmacy, heading to work, picking up groceries, checking on an elderly parent. She adjusts.

But cities are not accidental. As sociologist Emile Durkheim argued in 'The Division of Labour in Society' (1893), social systems are organised to perform functions and maintain order. Urban infrastructure — transport networks, zoning regulations, and housing design — is part of this structure. Historically, however, it has been imagined around a particular figure: the male commuter/breadwinner. What if women who navigate cities differently were the ones who designed them? What are the shifts we would see?

1 | **Adjusting to Belonging**

In Kolkata's Maidan at dusk, in Delhi's neighbourhood parks, in Bengaluru's lakeside promenades, a familiar pattern emerges: men gather; women pass through, particularly after dark. Even in parks, they engage in purposeful activities — brisk walking, accompanying children — rather than lingering. The common response has been segregation: women-only compartments, pink autos, reserved seating. But cities designed with women in mind could embed safety in everyday infrastructure. Lighting would be continuous rather than decorative. Pavements would be wide, even and unobstructed. Seating would be dispersed rather than clustered in male-dominated zones. As Jane Jacobs in 'The Death and Life of Great American Cities' (1961) argued safety emerges from "eyes on the street" — mixed-use neighbourhoods, active storefronts, and steady pedestrian presence. Cities such as Vienna have demonstrated how gender-sensitive planning reshapes

mobility through wider pavements, better lighting, and redesigned housing layouts. Bengaluru's pedestrian-friendly TenderSURE roads show that this is possible in India. The question is not affordability; it is priority.

2 | **Transport That Reflects Real Lives**

The male commuter model assumes one origin and one destination. Yet India's Time Use Survey (2019) shows women shoulder a disproportionate share of unpaid care work. Their journeys are layered: school, market, workplace, clinic, home. But transport planning prioritises peak-hour office traffic. Last-mile connectivity is patchy. Footpaths dissolve into construction debris. Bus stops lack shelter and lighting. If transport systems were designed around women's mobility patterns, routes would link residential areas to schools, markets and health centres, not only corporate hubs. Interchanges would be stroller-friendly and accessible to the elderly and disabled. Traffic signals would account



**ACCESS MATTERS:** Free bus travel led to more female ridership in Delhi and Bengaluru

for how long a child or older adult takes to cross. Strict enforcement against speeding and red-light violations would not be cosmetic but foundational. When policy goes beyond the male-default model, the results are evident. The free bus travel scheme for women in Delhi and Bengaluru significantly increased female ridership. When access improves, participation follows.

3 | **Safety by Design, Not Surveillance**

Since the protests over the 2012 Nirbhaya gangrape, the dominant govt response has emphasised surveillance — CCTV cameras, patrols, women-only spaces. While necessary, these are reactive measures. Safety should not rest on individual caution but be produced collectively through thoughtful design. For instance, underpasses that do not resemble dim tunnels of anxiety. Informal vendors, often labelled encroach-

ments are recognised as contributors to vibrancy and safe streets.

4 | **Housing That Recognises Labour**

Research has long shown that many women are home-based workers. Yet housing rarely reflects this. Step into a middle-class apartment in Kolkata or a resettlement colony in Delhi and a spatial reality emerges: kitchens are often small, enclosed and isolated. Social infrastructure — schools, parks, and markets — isn't always within walking distance. In informal settlements, design failures are sharper. Distant water points, poorly maintained community toilets and overcrowded layouts make daily routines physically exhausting. Poor ventilation contributes to respiratory illness. Limited access to safe public space further restricts activity, increasing risks of non-communicable disease (NCD). If women shaped design, kitchens would be ventilated and integrated. Shared courtyards could support collective childcare. Water and sanitation would be treated as core infrastructure, not afterthoughts. Swachh Bharat emphasised toilet construction; the next step is dignified, usable design.

5 | **Recognition to Representation**

Perhaps the most transformative shift would be institutional. Urban planning bodies and infrastructure boards remain overwhelmingly male. Cities are drafted in rooms where the everyday choreography of women's lives is underrepresented. When planners lack gender-disaggregated data on mobility and safety, they design for an abstract 'average' citizen who often resembles a man. Designing cities around women's needs is not a niche concern. It is an economic imperative — because mobility influences labour force participation. It is also a public health issue — because walkability, clean air and safe transport shape well-being and determine exposure to NCDs, respiratory illness and road injuries. It is a democratic issue — because public space signals who belongs.

This International Women's Day, the most meaningful gesture would not be symbolic celebration but structural change: more women at drafting tables, in planning boards, transport authorities and housing committees. A city designed with women at its centre would not only be safer for women. It would be healthier, more equitable, and more humane for everyone. ■

*Bhattacharya is a medical anthropologist and public health expert and Dasgupta is an architect-planner*

# India's lessons for a gender discourse



SHEHZAD POONAWALA



VIJETA RATTANI

The United Nations' theme for International Women's Day 2026 - "Rights, Justice, Action. For ALL Women and Girls" is a call to dismantle discriminatory laws, policies, practices and systemic barriers that pose barriers towards women equality and empowerment. Despite notable progress on gender equality globally, glaring gaps persist across education attainment, skill development, health outcomes, livelihood opportunities, leadership roles, resource-sharing and mobility.

Still, less than 20 per cent of the world's landholders are women, around 40 per cent of rural girls attend secondary school, many are excluded from decision-making roles and subjected to systemic violence, segregation, and neglect. Moving forward requires interventions that are comprehensive, long-term and transformative, going beyond welfare and incremental policy fixes. In this context, the Indian government's approach of women-led development under Prime Minister Modi adds a significant dimension to the gender agenda.

By hailing Nari Shakti as a driving pillar of society and innovation, it

positions women as architects of India's 'Viksit Bharat' vision and development journey rather than passive beneficiaries. This approach prioritizes gender and embeds it in structural framework by adopting a life cycle perspective, mainstreaming gender across policy areas and introducing targeted interventions including inducting women into new domains, thus breaking the traditional silo approach and seeking to shift societal attitudes, beyond just economic empowerment.

Let's not forget, the genesis of International Women's Day lies in the 1909 strike of New York garment workers demanding fair wages, dignity and better conditions. That spark grew into a global movement and IWD was recognized by the UN in 1975. For centuries, women across the world endured social, political and legal subjugation until the industrial revolution and feminist movements began to challenge entrenched norms.

India's story runs parallel, yet is also distinct. Here, women once ruled kingdoms, led armies, shaped philosophy, patronized art and education, and were revered as embodiments of the divine feminine. Centuries of invasions and patriarchy, among other factors, curtailed this stature, yet women never surrendered. They powered the freedom struggle, advanced environmental movements, innovated farming and safeguarded traditional knowledge. The post-colonial challenge in India has therefore been more than economic welfare. It is a deeper battle to dismantle patriarchy, shift attitudes and restore women to their historic place as leaders, innovators and agents of change.

Globally, India is signatory to key treaties advancing women's rights, dignity, and equality, from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to the Beijing Declaration and Agenda for Sustainable Development 2030. It has also shaped gender agenda at other forums such as climate summits and through its G20 Presidency, mirroring its domestic outlook. Nationally, the Constitution guarantees equality and the Directive Principles emphasize equal livelihood, pay and maternity relief.

The NDA government has marked a decisive shift towards gender agenda by embedding women's agency into the country's structural framework. The Nari Shakti Vandana Adhiniyam reserves one-third of legislative seats, making women authors of laws, while measures such as the abolition of Triple Talaaq, PM Ujjwala Yojana for clean cooking, Jal Jeevan Mission for safe water and Awas Yojana for housing restore dignity and transform living.

A life-cycle approach to ensure support from birth to old age is directed at comprehensive development covering birth, nutrition, skilling, employment, leadership, social security and old age, with schemes like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, Saksham Anganwadi, and POSHAN 2.0. Ayushman Bharat, Atal Pension Yojana, Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Kendras, PMGDISHA, Lakhpati Didi, SHE Marts, WISE-KIRAN, etc. Additionally, induction of women in defence and combat roles serve to break the structural barriers too.

From a policy perspective, gender is mainstreamed across development



domains, resulting in gender-responsive plans and strategies including in livelihoods pathways, climate action and decentralized energy solutions that address women's specific needs and vulnerabilities. Institutional mechanisms such as Gender Resource Centres and gender desks and capacity building measures especially at grassroot levels and across stakeholders seek to sensitize and provide right tools and knowledge to prioritize gender.

Quantitatively, decisive gains are achieved. The sex ratio has improved to 930 per 1000 males, infant mortality has fallen by 37 per cent in the last decade and maternal mortality has dropped by 86 per cent since 1990. Women now constitute 58 per cent of PMKVY trainees, 69 per cent of MUDRA loan recipients and 73 per cent of housing beneficiaries. Sixteen

crore women have accessed maternal care services, while women-led MSMEs have nearly doubled in a decade. Enabling environments have produced outcomes once unimaginable, from lifting the cricket World Cup and shaping electoral victories to pioneering Jal Shakti Abhiyan and curating OTT content.

Beyond statistics, India's holistic approach is reshaping the foundations of development, driving inclusive and lasting growth by ensuring access to resources, acceptability, leadership roles and mindset shifts. The Indian story is transforming, slowly but surely. It demonstrates how systems can enable women to lead and redefine the nation's growth trajectory.

(The writers are, respectively, National Spokesperson, Bharatiya Janata Party and a practitioner of developmental and sustainability issues.)

# Destruction can never be a strategy

FARAH N JAN

Shortly after the opening salvo of U.S.-Israeli attacks on Iran on 28 February 2026 - with missiles targeting cities across the country, some of which killed Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei - President Donald Trump declared the objective was to destroy Iran's military capabilities and give rise to a change in government.

Framing the operation as a war of liberation, Trump called on Iranians to "take over your government."

In the first days alone, Israel dropped over 2,000 bombs on Iranian targets, equal to half the tonnage of the 12-day Israel-Iran conflict in June 2025. Heavy U.S. bombing, meanwhile, has targeted Iran's Revolutionary Guard as well as ballistic missile and aerial defence sites.

The destruction is real. But, as an international relations scholar, I know that destruction is not the same as political success. And the historical record of U.S. bombing campaigns aimed at regime change shows that the gap between the two - the point at which Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya campaigns all stalled - is where wars go to die.

Decades of scholarship dating back to World War I on using air power to force political change has established a consistent finding: Bombing can degrade military capacity and destroy infrastructure, but it does not produce governments more cooperative with the attacker.

Political outcomes require political processes - negotiation, institution-building, legitimate transitions of power. Bombs cannot create any of these. Instead, what they reliably create is destruction, and destruction

generates its own dynamics: rallying among the population, power vacuums, radicalization and cycles of retaliation.

The American record confirms this. In 2003, the George W. Bush administration launched "Shock and Awe" in Iraq with the explicit aim of regime change. The military objective was achieved in weeks. The political objective was never achieved.

The U.S. decision to disband the Iraqi army created a vacuum filled not by democratic reformers but by sectarian militias and eventually ISIS. The regime that eventually emerged was not friendly to American interests. It was deeply influenced by Iran.

In 2011, the Obama administration led a NATO air campaign in Libya that quickly expanded from civilian protection into regime change. Dictator Moammar Gadhafi was overthrown and killed.

But there was no plan for political transition. Chaos and political instability have endured since. Asked what his "worst mistake" was as president, Barack Obama said, "Probably failing to plan for the day after, what I think was the right thing to do, in intervening in Libya." Libya remains a failed state today.

The intervention also sent a powerful signal to countries pursuing nuclear weapons: Gadhafi had dismantled his nuclear programme in 2003. Eight years later, NATO destroyed his regime.

Even Kosovo, often cited as the success story of coercive air power, undermines the case. Seventy-eight days of NATO bombing did not, by themselves, compel Slobodan Milosevic, president of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, to withdraw.

What changed was the credible threat of a ground invasion combined with Russia's withdrawal of diplomatic

support. The political outcome - contested statehood, ongoing ethnic tensions - is hardly the stable governance that air power advocates promise.

The pattern is consistent: The United States repeatedly confuses its unmatched capacity to destroy from the air with the ability to dictate political outcomes.

The recent U.S. attacks on Iran raise a fundamental question: Why is the United States fighting this war at all?

The administration has declared regime change as its objective, justifying the campaign on the grounds of Iran's nuclear programme and missile capabilities.

But that nuclear programme was being actively negotiated in Geneva days before the strikes. And Iran's foreign minister told NBC the two sides were close to a deal. Then the bombs fell.

Iran did not attack America. And it currently does not have the capability to threaten the American homeland. What Iran challenges is Israel's regional military dominance, and I believe it is Israel's objective of neutralizing a rival that is driving this operation.

Israel targeted 30 senior Iranian leaders in the opening strikes. Israeli officials described it as a preemptive attack to "remove threats to the State of Israel." I see the strategic logic for these killings as Israel's, and Americans are absorbing the costs.

U.S. military bases in Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, the UAE, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia have taken Iranian missile fire. American service members are in harm's way not because Iran attacked them, but I believe because their president committed them to someone else's war without a clear endgame.

Each coercive step in this conflict - from the 2018 withdrawal from the nuclear deal, to the 2020 assassination of Qasem Soleimani, Iran's most powerful military commander, to the June 2025 strikes - was framed as restoring leverage.

Each produced the opposite, eliminating diplomatic off-ramps, accelerating the very threats it aimed to contain.

Decapitation strikes assume that removing a leader removes the obstacle to political change. But Iran's political system is institutional - the Guardian Council, the Assembly of Experts and the Revolutionary Guard have survived for four decades.

The system has succession mechanisms, but they were designed for orderly transitions, not for active bombardment. The group most likely to fill the vacuum is the Revolutionary Guard, whose institutional interest lies in escalation, not accommodation.

There is a deeper irony. The largest protests since 1979 swept Iran just weeks ago. A genuine domestic opposition was growing. The strikes have almost certainly destroyed that movement's prospects.

Decades of research on rally-around-the-flag effects - the tendency of populations to unite behind their government when attacked by a foreign power - confirms that external attacks fuse regime and nation, even when citizens despise their leaders.

Iranians who were chanting "death to the dictator" are now watching foreign bombs fall on their cities during Ramadan, hearing reports of over 100 children killed in a strike on a girls school in Minab.

Trump's call for Iranians to "seize control of your destiny" echoes a

familiar pattern. In 1953, the CIA overthrew Iran's democratically elected prime minister in the name of freedom. That produced the Shah, the Shah's brutal reign led to the Iranian Revolution in 1979, and the revolution produced the Islamic Republic now being bombed.

What comes next? And what guarantee is there that whatever emerges will be any friendlier to Israel or the United States?

This is the question no one in Washington has answered. If the objective is regime change, who governs 92 million people after?

If the objective is stability, why are American bases across the Middle East absorbing missile fire?

There is no American theory of political endgame in Iran - only a theory of destruction. That theory has been tested in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya - and Iran itself over the preceding eight months. It has failed every time, not because of poor execution, but because the premise is flawed.

Air power can raze a government's infrastructure. It cannot build the political order that must replace it. Iran, with its sophisticated military, near-nuclear capability, proxy networks spanning the region and a regime now martyred by foreign attack, will likely not be the exception.

U.S. law prohibits the assassination of foreign leaders, and instead Israel killed Iran's supreme leader while American warplanes filled the skies overhead. Washington has called the result freedom at hand, but it has not answered the only question that matters: What comes next?

(The writer is Senior Lecturer in International Relations, University of Pennsylvania. This article was published on [www.theconversation.com](http://www.theconversation.com))

## NOW AND AGAIN

### PARASOCIAL IS NOT PARA-SOCIAL

SHOVANLAL CHAKRABORTY

I eagerly wait for this time of the year when dictionaries proclaim new words of the year gone by. Merriam-Webster has just declared 'slop' as the new word for 2025, while Collins Dictionary has declared 'vibe coding' as the new word for the year. Cambridge Dictionary's word of the year was 'parasocial', meaning a one-sided psychological bond where a person feels they know and have a relationship with a media figure - a celebrity or fictional character - who is unaware of their existence, creating an intimacy through media like television, social media, etc. I was thinking about how prefixes can change the meaning of a word. Take 'para', for example. We have just seen what 'para' does to 'social' - reducing one associated with society to one forming a one-sided bond. A person who is paranoid is entirely different from a 'paragon' of virtue. One suffers from delusions of persecution or grandeur, while the other describes someone or something that is a perfect embodiment of a concept or behaviour.

A paraplegic person is one who we might want to help if we could, while a parasite is a person we would rather shun.

When it comes to professions, a paramedic is a person trained to give emergency medical treatment, while a paralegal is a person with specialised training to assist lawyers, and paramilitary is an unofficial military unit. 'Paradigm shift' is a commonly used phrase while talking about new shifts in policy issues both in the government and in the corporate sector.

'Parochial' would refer to a narrow-minded outlook on issues and situations. 'Parasailing' refers to a sport in which a person is harnessed to a parachute-like device being pulled by a vehicle. 'Paragliding' is another sport where a person is harnessed to a manoeuvrable parachute-like wing. While both these are for the sporty kind, a paratrooper is someone who specialises in parachuting from an aircraft, sometimes behind enemy lines, often compromising his life.

In the English language, a paradox is different from a paradoxical statement. One means a statement that contradicts itself, while the other means that something is seemingly contradictory but nonetheless possibly true. When you write a paragraph on a subject, it is usually one of several subdivisions of a longer text, but when you paraphrase something, you put into your own words something you have just read or heard, in a shorter version.

A parody is a humorous imitation of more serious writing or music, while a parable is a short story that usually illustrates a moral or lesson.

The world of the 'para' could go on and on, and if we take the Bengali meaning of the word 'para' means a small road bound locality. Bengalis have been "para-social" from long before the Cambridge Dictionary got hold of the word.

The word "para-social" for Bengalis means just the opposite of what has been included in the dictionary, as it denotes real bonding between people interacting on a regular basis. The biggest evidence for Bengalis being para-social are the intra, and inter-para marriages that take place in the community. So, in the future, never cock a snook at a prefix because a wrong one could change what you set out to say!

## News Items

### OBSTINATE SOVIET

### REFUSES TO EVACUATE OXUS ISLAND

(From Our Correspondent, Allahabad, Mar.)

The Pioneer writes: How determined is the attitude of the Afghan Government in connexion with the Oxus Island dispute with Soviet Russia can be gauged by the latest advices from Kabul, which show that the Afghan portion of the boundary demarcation commission is still in the capital, owing to the continued refusal of the Soviet to evacuate its troops from the Island. There has been a considerable movement of troops in Afghanistan, attended with no little, local excitement, but the time which has elapsed since the incidents attending the seizure of the Island by the Soviet rather points to a desire on the part of both disputants to arrive at a peaceful settlement.

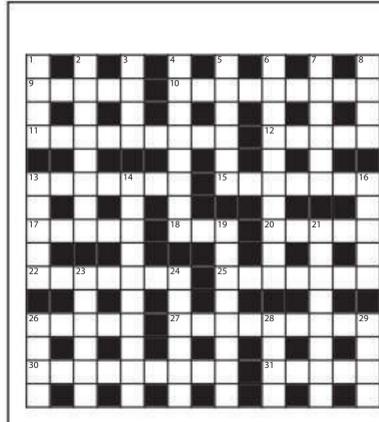
### TRIPLE MURDER?

### ALLEGED CONFESSION OF GUILT

Delhi, Mar.

The story of a triple murder comes from Bara Hindu Rao. It is alleged that on Thursday last, Anwar Ali, employed in a local cinema, getting suspicious of his wife's conduct, murdered his mother-in-law and two sisters-in-law, and seriously wounded his wife and brother-in-law.

## Crossword | No. 293397



### Last Sunday's Solution

BERLIN WALL TORC  
L A N E U B O  
E M C E E E S S E N T I A L  
D T O P P H O L L  
T I N C U B I T P R A V I D A  
S C U N T M I T  
O L D S T A G E R H A I R E  
U E Y A T I D R  
T A M P S U P E R N O V A  
H O C H S T I L L  
D E N T A L W E A P O N  
O S R A T N R H  
W A I S T C O A T G L O B E  
N D U C T S R  
S L A G G E T H S E M A I N E

### ACROSS

- 9 The last sign of resistance (5)
- 10 Swimming every gala in a mediocre fashion (9)
- 11 He corrects each misdirected flyer (9)
- 12 Still upset? Not very (5)
- 13 Hold up back of trousers with belt or elastic (7)
- 14 Denial of weapon (5)
- 15 What buds do sometimes on vacation in Orlando? (7)

- 17 Butchered animal and left out membranes (5)
- 18 Light-headed (3)
- 20 Snoops around hostess (5)
- 22 Sport featuring Raider and a naughty kid jumping around (7)
- 25 Dorian dashed back inside store for cereal (7)
- 26 Cover for bishop's joint (5)
- 27 Once again insist on some sunscreen for cellulite (2-7)
- 30 To struggle against associate taking criminal cut (9)

### DOWN

- 1 Where solver can find a castle's boundary! (4)
- 2 Removing outer layers of eczema on nipple agitated old gasbag (8)
- 3 Overload current charging motor (4)
- 4 Scotch bonnet burns - remedy taken by mouth (8)
- 5 Nearly threw away page over writer's tip (3,3)

- 6 A frail icon rattling around Hollywood home (10)
- 7 Reported fees for American banks (6)
- 8 Bulge spotted in Darcy's trousers (4)
- 13 Player left to go in second (5)
- 14 Exercising nude with active viewers (2,8)
- 16 Dim boy holds good degree (5)
- 19 Person involved in public relations regularly fell for bad lines (8)

- 21 Perhaps emergency exit leads to steel duct (8)
- 23 Parcel contains voided ticket for Waterloo? (6)
- 24 Strategic gain from concrete situation? (6)
- 26 See 29
- 28 Plant a kiss on Frank Lampard initially (4)
- 29/26 Always veer off course, occasionally crossing motorway (8)

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

TODAY IS INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

# Realities and responsibilities of women empowerment

VANAM JWALA NARASIMHA RAO

The International Women's Day (IWD) dates to the early 1900's, when oppression and inequality prompted women to become vocal and active and crusade for gender equality. Theresa Malkiel, an American labour activist first proposed the 'National Women's Day (NWD)'. Later, Clara Zetkin, a German Marxist theorist, Communist activist and advocate for women's rights, in 1910 proposed that every year 'Women's Day' must be celebrated in every country. Just prior to the First World War, Russian women observed the maiden IWD on February 23.

Eventually, IWD was officially marked by the United Nations, when the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution proclaiming that the 'UN Day for Women's Rights and International Peace' be observed by all member states in accordance with their historical and local traditions. Consequently, the UN formalized the global observance of IWD, within the international institutional framework. Thus, International Women's Day has been observed every March 8, since 1975.

The eighth UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon, on September 20, 2014, launched the popular 'HeForShe' Solidarity Movement for the advancement of gender equality.

As the world prepares for IWD 2026, the UN has unveiled a powerful new theme, 'Rights, Justice, Action' for all women and girls, as the focus, targeting the legal gaps that still leave women with only 64 per cent of the rights held by men globally.

Conceptually, empowering women emerged from a long historical struggle for equality across domestic, social, political, and economic spheres. Empowerment implies enabling women to participate fully in decision-making processes that shape their family and community

## Changing from 'symbolic endorsement to substantive partnership'

lives, but not namesake awarding few freebies, not to speak of political intentions. The global observance of IWD reflects both acknowledgment of progress achieved and a continuing reminder to rectify structural and cultural inequities that persist across societies.

Men's support in this process manifested both passively and actively. Passive may include non-obstruction, acceptance of women's professional aspirations, and private endorsement of equality. Active includes strongly advocating policy reforms, challenging discriminatory practices, sharing domestic responsibilities, mentoring women in leadership, and confronting gender bias within institutional spaces. Progress accelerates only when male allies move towards: 'Changing from Symbolic Approval to Substantive Partnership,' especially in societies where men continue to occupy disproportionate positions of authority.

This explains why, despite measurable gains in literacy rates, workforce participation, legal protection and political representation across the globe, disparities persist across several spheres. The phrase 'And miles to go' is not rhetorical. It reflects statistical realities and entrenched socio-cultural patterns. Societal apathy appears not as overt opposition but as normalization of inequality, treating imbalance as tradition, private matter, or inevitable condition. Structural inertia and explicit resistance frequently slow reform. These are all 'harsh realities'!

Women's own responses to empowerment initiatives, such as prioritizing domestic roles by choice, shaped by cultural values, economic calculation, personal preference, or internalized norms, need subtle and objective analysis. Distinguishing between constrained choice and genuine preference remains analytically challenging in many contexts. Em-



Clara Zetkin



Theresa Malkiel

powerment does not prescribe a uniform life path but seeks to expand real options and capabilities. Whether in domestic management or elsewhere, the presence or absence of equitable opportunity is the crux of meaningful empowerment.

The word 'Empowerment' itself stretches far back into the history of language and power. It derives from the old French verb meaning 'to give power' or 'to authorise'. This, in turn, was rooted in a Latin term meaning 'to be able and powerful', which also gave rise to the English word 'power'. Long before the English term existed, the underlying idea was present in Roman law and governance.

In ancient India, the Sanskrit word 'Shakti' meant 'power' or 'empowerment' and referred to the ancient cosmic energy representing the dynamic forces, believed to move through the entire Universe in Hindu thought. Shakti was the concept or personification of divine

feminine creative power or 'the great divine mother.'

Empowerment, initially neutral and institutional, transformed into legal terms, development strategy, political demand, and personal aspiration. Kings empowered ministers. Churches empowered bishops. Courts empowered officials. It thus simply denotes authorization within established hierarchies.

Therefore, the concept of empowerment, in its fundamental sense, shall not be confined to women alone. It must be widened beyond gender as an all-pervading principle tied to human dignity, autonomy, and participation. Positively directed, it seeks justice, inclusion, and balanced participation. Negatively applied, power may be misused or concentrated in ways that create new hierarchies and exclusions.

Objectively understood, empowerment involves access to education, resources, legal rights, representation, and

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economic opportunity. In each case, empowerment signifies strengthening institutional frameworks so that individuals are enabled to participate meaningfully in shaping their environment. Subjectively understood, empowerment concerns perception and internal capacity.

In contemporary global discourse, institutions such as the United Nations have framed empowerment across multiple dimensions. It is an all-pervading concept extending to every marginalized voice, every overlooked community, and every individual whose potential remains unrealized. It is neither exclusively political nor purely psychological, neither solely external nor entirely internal. It represents a dynamic interplay between systems and selfhood, between opportunity and initiative.

There can be no two opinions on the

principle of women empowerment in its noblest form globally, nationally, and of course within Telangana State. The moral, constitutional, and developmental arguments stand aligned in their favor. Yet it must also be remembered that empowerment is not entirely a modern concession. Long before contemporary democratic processes, history and tradition recorded women exercising influence, wisdom, and authority.

From Gargi and Maitreyi in ancient Indian philosophical debates, to Rani Rudrama Devi, women demonstrated leadership, intellect, and administrative capability.

In more modern times, Sarojini Naidu, Indira Gandhi, Sushma Swaraj, Sonia Gandhi, and Nirmala Sitharaman, among others illustrate the continuum of women's participation in governance and public life.

Their journeys, emerging from different historical moments reinforce that empowerment is not merely aspirational rhetoric, but a lived reality repeatedly affirmed across generations. The final and decisive dimension lies in mindset. Both men and women must consciously tune their attitudes toward constructive partnership rather than competitive assertion. Eventually, empowerment becomes effective when it is internalized as shared social progress.

In tune with UN Themes of 'HeForShe' (2014), and 'Rights, Justice, Action' for All Women and Girls (2026), the Telangana government appears like earnestly proceeding with the slogan and campaign of 'men standing with women' envisaging, structured, year-long, men-led initiative focused on preventing violence against women and girls. Everyday behaviours, silence, and social acceptance that enable harassment, abuse, and harm across public, private, digital, and institutional spaces are likely to be addressed. These are the 'realities and responsibilities' of women empowerment.

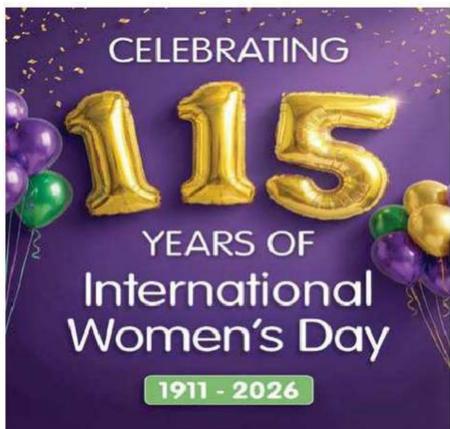
## There is no limit to what women can accomplish

**The theme for 2026 is 'Give to Gain', a campaign focused on promoting generosity, mentorship, and investment to accelerate gender equality. The core message is that when women thrive, we all rise. An ambitious career-oriented woman, a self-respected woman wants a dignified life and not be treated as a slave.**

HYMA MOORTY

Every March 8th the world celebrates International Women's Day (IWD) as a global event. It is a day to celebrate the accomplishments and achievements of women across spheres, including culture, arts, sports, politics, economy and society at large. Women have stepped boldly into those roles and fields where no man has gone before nor dared to go. The day highlights and reminds us of the unfinished tasks and the work that needs to be accomplished. According to me the best accomplishment for a woman is something you are pleased with and that you have achieved on your own riding on one's perseverance and effort. It might be anything such as completing schooling, possessing a college degree, participating in or taking first place in any contest, opening your own business or pursuing a field of individual interest. Initially it's a dilemma and a confusion about how to appropriately respond to the inquiry and land the dream position or mix with people. But as you move forward, the web clears and you saddle comfortably in such a place where you can advise others.

History is full of tales of important events that have made the world a better place to live in. Women had a pivotal role in many movements like voting rights, civil rights, LGBTQ+ rights, labor rights, children's rights and equal opportunities irrespective of gender. I remember as a child the arithmetic sums that I worked on when I was in class 4 or 5. The wages for women workers were quoted much less than the male workers. As a child, I hated such disparity and was disinterested in solving such problems and



felt as an insult to all working women. Thanks to the continuous efforts of women, such statements and problems have disappeared from our textbooks.

According to the United Nations, women make up 70 per cent of the world's 1.3 billion people in poverty, and of those displaced by climate related disasters, 80 per cent are women and girls.

Alas, the Covid pandemic worsened things for women and girls. They head to bear incomprehensible social and economic consequences when compared to men.

It will need a concentrated cohesive effort to reverse the effects. It is time that women who enjoy life as a woman donate to organizations working for gender equality. On this day let us all reflect on your own life, reflect on your own beliefs on a personal action plan. Think of those areas where you can improve upon yourself and others to improve themselves.

The day calls for action. Let us remind the world that progress doesn't happen by accident. All the successes for women the world sees and celebrates were not offered on a silver platter. But

it proves that nothing is impossible. Just turn back where we have been, see how far we have come and keep fighting and struggling for more because there are many less fortunate women in this world.

The theme for 2026 is 'Give to Gain', a campaign focused on promoting generosity, mentorship, and investment to accelerate gender equality. The core message is that when women thrive, we all rise. An ambitious career-oriented woman, a self-respected woman wants a dignified life and not be treated as a slave. The constant conspiracies, the fights between women, the extent to which the characters did not hesitate to take revenge and women being slapped and physically and mentally abused at the drop of a hat by both genders that is shown on the small screen day in and day out is not what today's woman wants.

Where did progressive ideas disappear? The modern audience should learn to reject the regressive ideas depicted on the screen. Women are not naive, pathetic, submissive and or confused.

Indian society is not a regressive society but a

progressive one. Don't over hype what is not there. The road to reach gender equality is still a long way. But today's women give hope that the road taken is the right one. If a woman raises voice for a right and a cause, she is not alone, she represents many women and stands up for many. By being a woman, with all your womanhood, you can still give a tough challenge to a man. President Draupadi Murmu took at least three high profile sorties in IAF aircraft-a Sukhoi, a Rafale Jet Fighter and 'Prachand' a high-altitude combat helicopter. It was a moment of pride for women everywhere, watching her walk confidently in that olive-green flight suit, towards the aircraft. She embodied courage. Nirmala Sitharaman has made it to the Forbes World's 'most powerful women' list a number of times.

Fighting, surviving and asking for equal rights does not mean man-hating. I am a woman, I have survived despite unfavorable situations, I want to be strong and make a mark in the world. This power must come from deep within. That is not a weapon but the power within you. Let people get used to seeing confident, educated, happy and powerful women. The strongest action for a woman is to love herself, be herself, and shine amongst those who never believed she could. Remember a woman fights many wars, mostly internal. She is a survivor. Each time a woman stands up for herself, she stands up for all women.

We need to reshape our own perception of how we view ourselves. We must step up as women and take the lead. Make yourself a storyteller of your life for others to emulate for a true-blue salute to womanhood.

## Driven by 99-day Praja Palana, TG to take governance to the people

AMARAVAJI NAGARAJU

THE aspirations that shaped the formation of Telangana were not merely about the creation of a new state; they were about building a governance model that reflected hopes of its people. The current government, led by Chief Minister A Revanth Reddy, appears determined to translate those aspirations into practice.

Recognising that political change alone does not guarantee transformation, the Congress government has set its sights on redefining the very character of governance. On that count, the 'Praja Palana' initiative seeks to move beyond rhetoric and establish a participatory administrative framework.

With the launch of a structured 99-day action on Friday, the government intends to take governance closer to the people. Designed around the principles of accountability, transparency and public participation, this programme aims to bring administrative processes into direct dialogue with citizens. From preparatory meetings at the district level to village assemblies and statewide reviews, the phased plan signals a conscious effort to institutionalise consultation as part of governance.

The programme will unfold in five stages. The preparatory meetings in erstwhile districts that marked the take-off on March 6, will be followed by gram sabhas (April 2), mandal-level meetings (April 16), constituency-level programmes (May 2) and district-level reviews on May 22. The process will culminate in a comprehensive evaluation during the State Formation Day celebrations on June 2. More than a calendar of events, this structure attempts to create a systematic channel through which public concerns, suggestions and grievances can directly influence policy implementation.

To ensure focus and measurable outcomes, the government has organised the 99-day programme into ten thematic areas covering key sectors of governance. One of the first priorities is administrative efficiency through the clearance of pending files and improvement in public service delivery. By addressing bureaucratic delays, the government hopes to reinforce trust in public institutions. Simultaneously, sanitation and cleanliness drives, right from the villages, are expected to contribute to better public health standards.

Healthcare forms another significant pillar of the initiative. Strengthening rural health centres, organising screening camps and prioritising maternal and child health services indicate an attempt to expand preventive healthcare. The in-



99 DAYS ACTION PLAN

**The programme also seeks to strengthen welfare delivery by directly addressing issues faced by beneficiaries of government schemes. In response to growing concerns about substance abuse among young people, a focused anti-drug and child safety campaign will be conducted across educational institutions and communities.**

novative 'Arrive Alive' road safety campaign aims to reduce accidents through awareness and enforcement measures.

The programme also seeks to strengthen welfare delivery by directly addressing issues faced by beneficiaries of government schemes. In response to growing concerns about substance abuse among young people, a focused anti-drug and child safety campaign will be conducted across educational institutions and communities. Education and youth empowerment occupy a central place in the plan. The focus of the government is on improving school infrastructure, filling teacher vacancies and expanding digital learning apart from skill development programmes and support for sports.

Agriculture remains a cornerstone of Telangana's economy. Ensuring timely supply of seeds and fertilisers, reviewing irrigation facilities and strengthening agricultural markets are intended to support farmers and improve farm incomes. In parallel, women's empowerment initiatives such as Mahalakshmi and Indiramma Mahila Shakti aim to strengthen self-help groups and expand economic opportunities for women.

As part of environmental sustainability, efforts to protect forests, expand tree cover and conserve water resources indicate an understanding that long-term development must be ecologically responsible. The programme also introduces a technology-driven monitoring

system. A dedicated mobile application will track progress in real time, enabling administrators and policymakers to assess implementation at every level. Such digital oversight could enhance transparency and ensure that development works move beyond announcements to tangible outcomes.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the initiative is its emphasis on citizen participation. By encouraging people to actively take part in gram sabhas and other such interactions, the government seeks to transform governance into a collaborative process. When governments are willing to listen and citizens are willing to engage, democratic institutions gain both legitimacy and strength.

The 'Praja Palana-Pragati Pranali' therefore represents more than a 99-day administrative programme. It is an attempt to cultivate a new culture of governance rooted in accountability, responsiveness and inclusive development.

The final review on June 2 will measure the immediate outcomes of the initiative. However, its larger significance lies in the message it conveys-governance must reach the people rather than expect people to navigate distant systems of power.

If implemented effectively, this approach could reaffirm a fundamental democratic principle that the true strength of governance lies in its proximity to the people it serves.



## TRUMP'S WAR-A-LAGO TRAPS WORLD ON IDEAS OF MARCH

THE war in West Asia—waged by the US and Israel over Iran—entered the second week on Saturday. In these seven days, Operation Epic Fury has dragged over a dozen countries into the theatre of conflict, grounded thousands of flights, and blocked shipment of oil and goods. It has sent crude oil prices to over \$92 a barrel, gold to over \$5,300 and sent stocks into a rabbit hole of anxiety.

The US describes it as "military operations" and not yet a "war", even though it has put millions of lives at risk, busted the supply chain of goods and energy, and left people in and outside the theatre anxiously watching the news streaming from the Persian Gulf. It bears mention that Russia's war on Ukraine—now in its fifth year—was tagged as a "special military operation".

The conflict is dubbed War-a-Lago since it was launched from Trump's nest Mar-a-Lago, just like the operation on Venezuela. Trump's War-a-Lago style claims adherence to broader America First geopolitics. It is fuelled by personalisation of politics, politicisation of faith and it is amplifying global instability. The journey from illusion to delusion is eloquently explained by Lord Varys in *The Game of Thrones*: "Power is a curious thing. It's a trick on the wall. A very small man can cast a very large shadow."

As the world heads towards the Ides of March, it is yet to be informed about the rationale for the war. Yes, there is speculation about Epstein files, echoes of Wag the Dog and other theories. Beyond the speculation: why, and why now? Team Trump has blathered around the question.

Trump said Iran planned to attack while it was in talks. Secretary Marco Rubio admitted Israel planned a strike, but the US couldn't stop it. So, a pre-emptive strike then. By the end of the week the "why" was about Iran's nuclear programme and ballistic missiles. That's curious since, in June 2025, Trump claimed that Iran's nuclear sites had been obliterated.

Now that we have the whys out of the way, let's look at what the objective is. Trump posted, "There will be no deal with Iran except UNCONDITIONAL SURRENDER!" And that Trump will choose the leader. Iran said it was no longer looking to negotiate. The standoff could end in one of three scenarios—total surrender, continuation of regime in Venezuela model, and total chaos. The only concession Iran has offered is not to target neighbours. Trump is yet to find a Delcy Rodriguez in Iran. The spectre of chaos—in a nation of 90 million aggrieved people torn asunder—haunts the Gulf Cooperation Council nations.

History is replete with instances of nations led by leaders intoxicated with hubris diving into disasters. In the 1800s, after invading Portugal, Napoleon decided to conquer Spain. The Spanish collaborated with guerrillas and British forces and tied down the French army all the way till 1814. Napoleon dubbed the campaign 'the Spanish ulcer' from which he never healed.

Hubris trips regimes in modern times too. The regime change of 1953—orchestrated by the US and the UK—had virtually failed before it was propped by CIA operative Kermit Roosevelt Jr. Roosevelt bribed the Iranian resistance to install the Shah. Every attempt by the US since World War II has ended badly—in Iraq, Syria, Libya and Afghanistan, where it replaced the Taliban with the Taliban.

The irony is that a victory is a necessary condition for the US and Israel. As for Iran, to borrow a football term, even a draw is a victory. The US clearly underestimated the response of Iran. In its response, it stands accused of slaying civilians—the death of over 160 schoolchildren killed by a missile strike in Minab is a tragedy of epic proportions.

For decades, the US has preached the power of example over the example of power. The Trump administration has binned the construct of example and established the suzerainty of power. On Thursday, the deputy secretary of state warned that the US would not repeat the mistakes it did with China. On Friday, the treasury secretary said the US was "permitting" India to buy Russian oil. On Saturday, the energy secretary said the US was "allowing our friends" to buy Russian oil. The embedded hierarchy of language stinks as it reflects expectations of subordination.

In its conduct of war, the US has—in its actions, words and silence when it should have spoken—shredded rules it co-authored, protocols it expects of others, and decencies anticipated. The targeting of Iranian frigate IRIS Dena—returning from an international review in India, torpedoed by a submarine clearly lurking in the region—is an illustration of superpower arrogance. It didn't matter that the ship was way off the war theatre, that it was a guest of India in India's sphere.

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## A NEW POLITICS OF GOVERNORS



### POWER & POLITICS

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

THE centre cannot hold unless the balance between authority and autonomy is maintained with vigilance. Every federal system survives on a fragile compact between power and restraint, between authority and accommodation, between the will of the Union and the mandate of the states. India's Constitution deliberately tilted this balance in favour of the Centre, but the system endured because governments in New Delhi generally observed certain conventions. Among the most important of these was the role of the Governor. Conceived as a constitutional sentinel, the Governor was expected to stand above partisan conflict and embody the quiet dignity of the Indian Republic. Yet the story of Indian federalism has repeatedly shown that Raj Bhavans rarely remain immune to politics.

Under the Modi government, the office of the Governor is undergoing another transformation. It's subtle in method, systematic in design and unmistakable in implications. Last week, President Droupadi Murmu unveiled a strategic gubernatorial shake-up, appointing fresh faces to seven posts amid escalating Centre-state skirmishes. Effective immediately, R N Ravi, the combative ex-Tamil Nadu governor, relocates to West Bengal, replacing C V Ananda Bose in a move analysts see as intensifying oversight over Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool turf.

Retired Lt Gen Syed At Hasnain assumes Bihar's helm, a Muslim military maestro signalling subtle communal outreach. Nand Kishore Yadav, a Bihar BJP

veteran, heads to Nagaland. Jishnu Dev Varma shifts from Telangana to Maharashtra, while Shiv Pratap Shukla swaps Himachal Pradesh for Telangana. Kavinder Gupta claims Himachal and Rajendra Arlekar adds Tamil Nadu to his Kerala charge. This remix, bypassing fixed tenures, underscores Modi's mantra of malleable loyalty, deploying disruptors to defiant domains like opposition-ruled Bengal and Tamil Nadu, where governors grapple with governance gridlock.

Governors have been removed, replaced or transferred whenever political winds changed. Yet, until recently, a loose convention moderated this power. Governors were generally allowed to complete their tenure unless there were compelling reasons to intervene. Transfers were infrequent, removals were restrained and the dignity of the office was preserved through a degree of institutional continuity. That restraint appears to be steadily dissolving. The latest reshuffle has once again revealed how fluid the office has become. Incumbents are shifted across states with little explanation, sometimes informed of their fate through media announcements rather than formal communication. Such abrupt movements may be constitutionally permissible, but they reinforce a growing perception that Raj Bhavans are no longer insulated constitutional spaces. They have become instruments in the strategic calculus of the Union government.

The real story lies not merely in the reshuffle, but in the profile of those being appointed. Traditionally, the post of Governor served as a dignified culmination for political veterans. Governments of every persuasion followed the same script. The Congress under Indira Gandhi placed trusted party leaders in Raj Bhavans. Later, BJP governments adopt-

ed similar practices. When Modi assumed office in 2014, the initial appointments reflected this tradition. Leaders such as Ram Naik in Uttar Pradesh, Kalyan Singh in Rajasthan and Vajubhai Vala in Karnataka represented the classic archetype of seasoned politicians rewarded for decades of loyalty and service.

Modi has given up traditional rewards, avoiding long-serving party members in favour of new figures from retired groups like civil servants, military leaders and academics free from deep political ties but committed to ideological goals. A detailed look at governors appointed under Modi since 2014 shows this break from usual practices. Across over 50 appointments and shifts since 2014, roughly 40 percent have Sangh or political backgrounds. But the shares of others have increased. Now, over 30 percent of Governors are drawn from civil services, 15 percent from defence forces, and academics and judicial figures account for 10 percent. The message is subtle but unmistakable: experience in the machinery of governance matters as much as, if not more than, that in electoral politics.

The cases like of Ravi, Taranjit Singh Sandhu and Hasnain illustrate this shift with striking clarity. When these appointments are examined collectively, a distinct pattern becomes visible. The Governors chosen over the past decade broadly fall into three categories: seasoned political loyalists from the BJP or its ideological orbit, retired administrators from the civil and security services, and technocratic figures such as diplomats or judges who command institutional respect. Their defining qualification appears to be a broader compatibility with the ideological and administrative orientation of the current leadership.

The political context is equally signifi-

cant. Despite its formidable parliamentary majority, the BJP does not govern a majority of India's states. Regional parties continue to rule populous and politically influential states such as Karnataka, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu and Kerala. In such circumstances, the constitutional powers of Governors acquire heightened importance. They decide whom to invite to form a government in a hung assembly, they recommend President's Rule in situations of constitutional breakdown and may reserve state legislation for presidential consideration. These powers, rarely exercised in ordinary times, can become decisive during moments of political uncertainty.

Not surprisingly, many of the most intense confrontations between Governors and elected governments have taken place in opposition-ruled states. The clashes between Ravi and the DMK government in Tamil Nadu, the prolonged tensions between Arif Mohammed Khan and the Left leadership in Kerala, and the earlier confrontations involving Jagdeep Dhankhar in West Bengal have turned Raj Bhavans into arenas of public political conflict. Opposition parties view these developments as evidence that Governors are increasingly acting as political supervisors on behalf of the Union government.

India's federal democracy has always been an exercise in equilibrium, a careful calibration of power and prudence. The Modi government's approach to gubernatorial appointments signals a new phase in that evolving relationship. Raj Bhavans are no longer quiet colonial relics surrounded by ceremonial gardens. They have become strategic institutions populated by individuals drawn from the commanding heights of the administrative state. Whether this transformation represents administrative modernisation or political centralisation will continue to provoke debate. Yet one truth remains constant. In a country as vast, diverse and argumentative as India, the centre cannot hold through authority alone. It endures only when power is tempered by restraint, when institutions command trust and when the delicate balance of federalism is guarded not merely by law, but by wisdom.



SOURAV ROY



### THE THIRD EYE

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

History is replete with instances of nations led by leaders intoxicated with hubris diving into disasters. In the 1800s, after invading Portugal, Napoleon decided to conquer Spain. The Spanish collaborated with guerrillas and British forces and tied down the French army all the way till 1814. Napoleon dubbed the campaign 'the Spanish ulcer' from which he never healed.

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## WAR & HOW TO REPORT NEXT WEEK'S NEWS



### INTEREST FREE

**SANTWANA BHATTACHARYA**  
Editor  
santwana@newindianexpress.com

USUALLY, one hears of chief ministers being changed just before an election. The list goes back to the famous Sushma Swaraj-Sahib Singh Verma switch hit in Delhi, 1998. Way before it happened, your columnist, then an unduly intrepid reporter, had put her career on the line, sticking her neck out and predicting it would happen. As in, certainly happen. In a bylined, front-page news article. Predictive journalism isn't really a thing, but the newspaper too was foolhardy enough to go with my conviction and bet big on it happening. Well, it did happen, 52 days before the election, though Sushma's valiant sixers in the final overs didn't work and the Sheila Dikshit era began.

In the Dixit's era, all parties have resorted to this last-minute call-up of a firefighter. At least 13 times. Sometimes it works, sometimes it flops, sometimes—like in Gujarat—it doesn't seem to matter who the CM is.

Predictive journalism still isn't a thing, and, as Dalai said, one roll of the dice doesn't abolish chance. Predictions can be wrong because they're just verbal expressions of probability-based forecasting, like the weather department does. And you know how fickle the weather is.

Jiang Xueqin, the Chinese 'Nostradamus', is gaining virality on his Predictive History channel on YouTube because, apparently using game theory, he said the following back in 2024: "I am making three big predictions: first, Trump will win in November. Second is that the United States will go to war against Iran, and the third prediction is that the US will lose this war, which will forever change the global order." Since he got it right on the first two, everyone's looking at global order right now. Well, it is indeed wobbling like a Bumrah beamer, even to the naked eye, isn't it? (And may our good boys defeat the evil Anglo settler colonialists at the T20 final today.)

But like Ghalib, we have other pressing domestic concerns too to fret about. A couple of events would have broken the internet with traffic surge if half our attention wasn't on live maritime traffic maps from the Strait of Hormuz and satellite images of the Prince Sultan airbase in the Saudi desert, where two excellent AN/TPY-2 radars lie crossed out. The "eyes" of the vaunted missile defence system called 'THAAD' (did someone from the Indrajal Comics team migrate to the US?) these radars come at only \$190 million a pop. Two of those toys, for us, equals ₹3,200 crore. That would have run 5,000 rural schools in UP for a year. In all, the US has lost \$2 billion... and counting. That's already UP's entire primary education budget for 2025-26.

But we digress. Back to chief ministers. We have broken tradition in Bihar by replacing a chief minister not before but after an election, that too one where the incumbent won with a record-breaking performance. Nitish Kumar's long sunset has been the subject of barbs and political invective. One does not wish to participate in that, except to note that there was no dearth of crystal ball gazers who had seen this coming. Unlike the bad old days before social media, when predicting a Sahib Singh Verma-Sushma

**A Chinese 'Nostradamus' who predicted Trump's win and his Iran strikes also claimed the US would lose this round to the Islamic Republic. The global order is indeed wobbling like a Bumrah beamer at the moment**

Swaraj replacement was a high-risk stunt that could only be performed by professionals, the drift of events these days has considerably mitigated the risk entailed in making dire prophecies. Freelance prophets happily peddle their trade without fear. "Imagine the most extreme event, and be sure it will be more extreme than that" is their SOP, and Nitish's exit after he fulfilled his responsibility was a relatively safe one to make.

The riskier one involves the state that you can reach to Bihar's immediate east, crossing over from Kishanganj. From the Chicken's Neck, all the way down its succulent body, West Bengal is

all agog. It has broken tradition too. Here, it's not the chief minister who has gone—at least, not yet. The feisty Mamata Banerjee was very much there when the last reports came in, like a feminine version of the indomitable Gaul. It's the Governor who has been changed weeks before an election.

But wait. What, pray, could that august office have to do with anything concerning politics at all? It's just a ceremonial constitutional post, even if the gubernatorial bungalow in this case used to serve as the Viceregal Lodge back in the days of Empire. Well, going by how the Trinamool Congress's enviable posse of sharpshooting spokespersons are popping about like *panch phoron* on a high flame in mustard oil, something could be afoot.

The right honourable Jagdeep Dhankhar (remember him?) used to occupy this bungalow not too long ago. He set a high bar. The present 'outcumbent' did his best during his tenure to fill those big spiked boots, but seems to have had a milder version of the Dhankhar mantra read out to him. In his stead, there has come rippling across the blue waters, like the *USS Abraham Lincoln*, a more formidable, battle-hardened frigate.

We are no longer in the business of predictions. The markets are too volatile for that. But anyone can see a dark storm building up in the Bay of Bengal. The sea temperature and wind patterns are conducive to cyclogenesis, as the weatherman might say. Even the Supreme Court has acknowledged how messy and incomplete this whole SIR process has been. Let's just say: chances of thunder.

### QUOTE CORNER

Netanyahu is the extremist who killed 75,000 in Gaza. The extremist who said invading Iraq would create "enormous positive reverberations". The extremist who has pushed US presidents to go to war with Iran for decades. Finally, he found a President who said yes. Tragically.

**Bernie Sanders**, US senator, opposing America's attacks on Iran

If the fuel supply situation does not improve, all ceramic units in Morbi will observe a collective shutdown after March 15.

**Manoj Arvadiya**, president of the Morbi Ceramic Association representing about 800 manufacturing units, on propane supply choked by the war

This is completely untrue, unhelpful and dangerous Islamophobic nonsense. Iran, Turkey, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Lebanon, Jordan have hosted millions of refugees. Please stop liking and RT-ing lies.

**Rory Stewart**, former British minister, on the repeated claim posted on X that Muslim-majority countries don't host refugees from others



### MAILBAG WRITE TO letters@newindianexpress.com

#### Insurers' call

Ref: *India to bear maximum brunt if Hormuz closure lasts longer* (Mar 7). Everyone thinks Iran closed the Strait of Hormuz. London did. Not the government there, but its insurance companies. Every day, about 107 cargo ships normally pass through the strait. But last week only 19 ships crossed because of the decision of insurance companies to withdraw coverage. About nine in 10 of the world's ships are insured by a dozen insurers, most of them based in the City of London. Now, a \$150-million tanker would not move without insurance. So the Strait of Hormuz wasn't blocked by a navy; it was blocked by a spreadsheet informed by risks.

**Mohan Natarajan**, email

#### American diktat

Ref: *30-day US waiver* (Mar 7). The US granting a 30-day concession to import oil from Russia speaks volumes about the extent to which our country has

become subservient to a global superpower. For a nation that possesses significant economic and strategic strength to appear to bow to the dictates of another country is, to say the least, mortifying. It is difficult not to recall the contrast set by Indira Gandhi, who stood firm against the threats of Richard Nixon during the 1971 Indo-Pak war.

**Abdul Hakeem**, Hyderabad

#### Oceanic peace

Ref: *Need to pull together again* (Mar 7). Rising tensions in the Indian Ocean highlight the urgent need for regional unity and diplomatic prudence. Sri Lanka's strategic location demands careful neutrality amid global rivalries. Strengthening maritime cooperation and collective security measures are essential to safeguarding peace, protecting trade routes and preventing further escalation.

**A C Vineeth Kumar**, Thrissur

#### Final countdown

Ref: *Time for Ahmedabad to blossom* (Mar 7). We, the fans of Sanju Samson, are really relieved that

he has finally produced two special innings to carry the Indian team to the final. Since he has been a hat-trick man in the past—whether scoring centuries or ducks—his last two innings could augur well for the final on Sunday. Of course, cricket is an unpredictable game and the Black Caps have time and again proved to be a spoilsport for us. Our team think-tank should focus on our bowling. Wishing our Men in Blue the final glory.

**Vinay Mahadevan**, Chennai

#### Mental support

Ref: *22-year-old woman dies by suicide* (Mar 5). Reports state that about 9,450 people died by suicide in Bengaluru between 2022 and 2025, which is a serious concern. Stress, financial problems, academic pressure and relationship issues are cited as some of the major reasons. There is an urgent need for greater mental health awareness, counselling facilities and community support systems. The government, educational institutions, and society must work together to address this issue.

**K R Gagan**, Tumakuru

#### Census clarifications

Ref: *Tamil Nadu to conduct digital Census* (Mar 7). There should be a guide accompanying the householding questionnaire to help respondents understand the questions. For example, in recording the source of drinking water—one of the 33 questions—a household drawing it from a well through pipes should tick 'piped water from untreated source', and not 'well water'. Without such clarifications, we would not get the correct picture.

**N Rama Rao**, Chennai

#### Medical cadre

Ref: *UPSC results out* (Mar 7). If we go through the profiles of the top candidates, we would see a large number from medical backgrounds, even graduates from AIIMS. If more top MBBS candidates shift to IAS careers, how would country's short-staffed hospitals be run? It might make sense to create a dedicated medical cadre like the forest service and other specialist cadres. It would serve both the nation and the candidates' aspiration.

**Varghese Cherukattu Thomas**, Thiruvalla

# Indian ocean should have been kept as 'zone of peace'

The tragedy connected with the unarmed Iranian frigate IRIS Dena with 130 sailors, which was sunk by an American submarine torpedo on March 4, reminds me of those days when two far-sighted women leaders of South Asia and the forgotten 'Non-Aligned' group of nations had tried to prevent such painful incidents happening in the Indian Ocean. This columnist was part of those efforts for a short time from the limited angle of operational intelligence.

While many in India might have forgotten those days, it was left to the Singapore-based Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy to remind us in 2024 how Prime Ministers Sirimavo Bandaranaike and Indira Gandhi had struggled to keep the Indian Ocean free of 'Superpower' militarisation and how the 'Quad' alliance, of which India is

a member now, is trying to dilute that process.

In a similar way, we owe a debt of gratitude to Prof Dr P Balagurusamy, Head and Associate Professor, Department of History, GTN Arts College, Dindigul, Tamil Nadu for reminding the posterity about the moves to keep the Indian Ocean as a 'Zone of Peace' through a 'Shanlax Journals' monograph in April 2015.

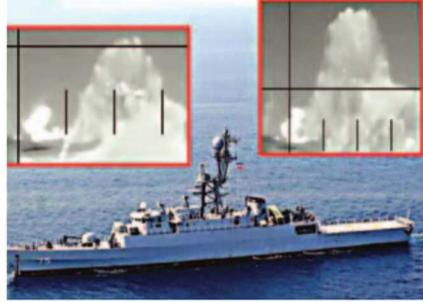
Moves by America and Soviet Union to militarily dominate the Indian Ocean started in April 1965 when some islands including Diego Garcia were grouped together as Chagos Archipelago or British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT) for military use by Britain and America. BBC in their piece "What I found on the secretive tropical island they don't want you to see" dated 29 September 2024 has given a remarkably frank account on what is happening there. Mauritian Prime Minis-



Vappala Balachandran

PMs Bandaranaike, Gandhi had struggled to keep free of 'Superpower' militarisation

**American move to activate a base in Diego Garcia was strongly opposed by Indian External Affairs Minister the late Dinesh Singh in the UN General Assembly in October 1969. This was supported by other delegates including from Sri Lanka and Indonesia**



ter Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam, who was forced to part with Diego Garcia for the Western Bloc, tried to balance the situation by signing a fishing agreement with Soviet Union. In 1968, America set up a Satellite tracking and telemetry station within the Seychelles group of islands.

American move to activate a base in Diego Garcia was strongly opposed by In-

dian External Affairs Minister the late Dinesh Singh in the UN General Assembly in October 1969. This was supported by other delegates including from Sri Lanka and Indonesia. The September 1970 Lusaka non-aligned summit appealed to the superpowers "to keep the Indian Ocean a nuclear-free zone."

However, the Soviet Union gained propaganda advantage out of this situation by declaring that "the promotion of the establishment of nuclear-free zones in various parts of the world" should be the sine qua non for international security.

Indira Gandhi ensured that this principle was part

of Indo-Soviet joint statement with Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev on 29 September 1971 during her visit to Moscow.

The 26th UN General Assembly (September to December in 1971) passed a joint resolution to declare Indian Ocean as the Zone of Peace, jointly moved by Sri Lanka and Tanzania by which the Indian Ocean, within limits to be determined, together with the airspace above and the ocean floor subjacent thereto, was designated for all time as a zone of peace.

The Assembly also called upon the Great powers to enter into consultations with the littoral States of the Indian Ocean with a view to halting the further escalation of their military presence. The last to join the process was the South Asian Association of Regional Co-operation (SAARC) Summits, which,

at least till 1986, repeated these calls.

Faced with this trend, the late R N Kao, founder of our external intelligence agency conceived the idea of a secret 'Trilateral co-operation' between France, India and Shah's Iran to use technical intelligence to watch the growing US-USSR rivalry in the Indian Ocean. He used his personal rapport with Le Compté Alexandre de Marenches, French External Intelligence Chief and SAVAK head General Nematollah Nassiri. This secret project could not last beyond the 1980s as Kao demitted office in 1977, Nassiri was killed by the Khomeini regime in 1979 and Marenches resigned in 1981.

*The author is former special secretary, Cabinet Secretariat. Views expressed are personal.*

## Will SC order make a dent?

Just at the end of the year, the Supreme Court gave a landmark judgement whereby it has ordered a nationwide audit of all private and deemed universities, transforming a student's grievance into a deep scrutiny of India's sprawling education sector. In a sweeping directive, the apex court asked the Centre, all states and UTs and the UGC to submit personally sworn affidavits disclosing how these institutions were set up, who governs them, what regulatory approvals they hold and whether they truly function on a not-for-profit basis. While this should have been investigated long ago, it remains to be seen that in the year ahead there will be a drastic review of private universities to highlight their shortcomings.

The question that is being alleged by a large section of scholars, and quite rightly, is whether education has steadily become totally profit-oriented. Undeniably, this is a fact and the reason why business houses are setting up universities and academic institutions across the country. But the point here is why should a business enterprise enjoy various types of facilities when it gives very little to society? This has never been questioned by the government or even by civil society in the right manner.

It is a well-known fact that private universities charge exorbitant rates and are profit-oriented. Most business houses find education a safe business to in-

vest where risk involved is virtually nil. Moreover, in the name of being not-for-profit, they get land from state governments at highly subsidized rates. Recall, in 2017, a Supreme Court verdict invalidated engineering degrees awarded via unapproved distance mode to deemed universities and barred them from conducting such courses without clear regulatory approval.

The current order is far-reaching as it questions how private universities acquire land, appoint leadership, handle finances and whether they have a credible grievance redressal mechanism. The demand for personal accountability - from chief secretaries to the UGC chairperson - signals judicial impatience with the status quo. It may further be pointed out that private universities, many of which operate under different and central laws, are rattled.

A question to be raised is what role the government has in the matter. Prime Minister Modi has been criticising Macaulay for anglicising the Indian way of thinking but the spread of quality education happened due to the efforts of the British. The Centre and the states have not invested adequately to ensure spread of education to all parts of the country, particularly rural and backward districts, and have allowed private parties to take over the business of education. There is no monitoring of fees being charged, whether seats are reserved for poor and marginalised sections



Dhurjati Mukherjee



and whether these institutions confirm to guidelines of the authorities, either by the Centre or the states.

Education being on the concurrent list, both are liable to ensure the right of every individual to education. But if we are to assume that private and deemed universities give quality education, why can a farmer's son not get the facility? These institutions are set up on huge land which the new apex court order has now asked the authorities to investigate. But it's feared that vested interests will find a way out to protect them, as these institutions are expanding rapidly and making enormous profits.

It would have been better if the court had found out a civil society organisation or an academic association in each state and asked them to file a report simultaneously with that of the state governments. It would not be impertinent to say that most political parties

and bureaucrats are seen as allegedly being dishonest and end up protecting owners of private and deemed universities. Or else how can they manage so much land near metros and big towns, which surround the educational complexes?

Has there been any investigation of the process of admissions to these institutions by any of the state governments? If there is any such a report, why has it not been made public? The undersigned, who was travelling to Delhi a few years back, was told by a family that they were asked to pay Rs 80 lakh extra (apart from usual fees) for their son's admission in a private medical college in Kolkata. There would be similar examples and hardly a very few private medical colleges admit students strictly on merit without any underhand charges.

While most engineering colleges have been set up by private parties, the question remains about the quality of teaching. The chief of KMDA (Kolkata Metropolitan Development Authority), a veteran civil engineer and guest faculty of many institutes, had once told me that when he asked one of his relatives why she had not gone to college (engineering), the young student replied that classes are not held every day.

*The author is a senior consultant & guest faculty of Bharatiya Vidya Bhawan, Kolkata. Views expressed are personal.*

## Women's Day in India!

BOB'S BANTER



Robert Clements

Across the world, women celebrate freedom. Hard won freedom. The right to vote. The right to work. The right to choose their partners. The right to equal pay. The right to stand up and say, "Excuse me gentlemen, kindly step aside, we also live on this planet."

It took decades. Sometimes centuries. Marches. Movements. Court battles. Angry speeches. Brave women who refused to sit quietly in the corner while men discussed their futures like they were items on a restaurant menu.

And here in India we also celebrate. But with our own unique innovation. We celebrate Women in Cages. Yes, while the rest of the world is busy breaking cages, we have become enthusiastic manufacturers of them.

Every few months a shiny new cage arrives in Parliament. Sometimes it is labelled Love Jihad. Sometimes it is honour. Sometimes it is protection. The label keeps changing, but the design remains exactly the same. A solid steel cage with a smiling man standing outside holding the key.

"Madam," he says kindly, "this is for your safety."

Indian men are extremely safety-conscious. We are so concerned about women's safety that we have decided the safest place for them is inside a cage designed entirely by us.

Inside the cage we offer many facilities. There is the Parental Approval Window. The Community Monitoring

System. And of course the Emergency Moral Police Service which arrives immediately whenever a woman is seen making her own decision.

After all, decision-making is a very dangerous activity. Imagine the chaos if women suddenly started choosing whom to marry, where to work, what to wear, or what to think.

Civilisation might collapse before the evening news.

So on Women's Day we proudly look at the cages we have constructed. Inside them women walk around carefully, adjusting to the bars. And we clap loudly. "Look how well protected they are!" we say to each other.

Meanwhile, the rest of the world is busy celebrating women breaking glass ceilings. Here we are polishing iron bars.

And then comes the most touching moment. We approach the cage with great ceremony and pass a few symbolic crumbs through the bars. A speech. A slogan. A hashtag. "Happy Women's Day!" we announce generously.

The woman inside the cage looks at us, holding the crumb of celebration in her hand, while the bars remain firmly in place.

But perhaps one day she will look at the cage, look at the man holding the key, and quietly say something that men have feared for centuries. "Thank you for the concern. Now kindly step aside."

Because when that day arrives, Women's Day in India will finally stop sounding like a zoo announcement and start sounding like freedom...!

## The world at a crossroads

An unbiased review of the state of the world especially with regards to events that happened in the recent past would show that despite bold and long steps taken on the path of development, there has been constant deterioration in the overall state of affairs of the world. Every day, we wake up to read, in the newspapers, that a new war has started in some part of the world or a previous conflict has escalated. The world seems to be in a state of utter confusion and great turmoil. Political, economic and communal structures seem to be in a state of constant repair. There are efforts everywhere for mending and patching up, yet daily,

we appear to be drifting away from a healthy, normal and peaceful condition. What explains this contradiction? At the heart of it lies a crisis not of systems, but of values. Arrogance, insatiable lust for name and fame and mad race for power and position seem to have gripped even the mind of religious high-ups. Leadership, once associated with responsibility and service, is increasingly measured by influence and control. The situation has become so bad that one cannot utter a word of advice, in good faith, even to one's friends and younger brothers or juniors today. Faith, love and non-violence are now non-virtues; these are now considered as signs of a weak

SPIRITUAL INSIGHT



Rajyogi Brahmakumar Nikunjji

**The question of disarmament has been going on for decades, but it seems that the leaders of the world are in a different mood**

will or a submissive culture. One is asked to be smart, assertive, extrovert and even exhibitionist to the point of being clever, manipulative, cunning, rude and boisterous. Cleverness is rewarded more than character, and visibility more than virtue. There is flagrant violation of law even by those who are supposed to be custodians or protective arms of law. In short, there are tensions almost everywhere.

The question of disarmament has been going on for decades, but it seems that the leaders of the world are in a different mood. Hence,



the solution to this problem seems to be too knotty to be resolved. The state of affairs of the world is such today that if one country sincerely makes a withdrawal and ceasefire offer to another, the latter rejects it saying that it is too late. So, one may ask: "In such a sit-

uation, who will prevent whom from aggression and from using nuclear weapons? Is there a single person on the world scene who has such a moral authority and an unblemished record and universal popularity who can exert his moral influence because of his own stature and universal appeal to cry a halt to aggressive acts? To a world which did not listen to the advice of Christ or Buddha or Mahatma Gandhi to give up violence, who can morally compel all to give up arms and have love and compassion? The uncomfortable possibility is this: external enforcement alone cannot secure lasting peace. Weapons are extensions of fear, insecurity and mistrust. As long as these forces dominate collective consciousness, agreements on paper will remain fragile. Political solutions, though necessary, cannot substitute for moral awakening. Economic reforms, while important, cannot alone re-

store trust. Technological innovation, however impressive, cannot generate compassion. It should thus be understood clearly by all that Peace is not merely the absence of war; it is the presence of stability within human consciousness.

By nature, man generally wants to avoid tough questions and hard realities of life. If anyone points out, in advance, of the coming obnoxious events, seeing the shadows cast by them before, the former does not take the latter kindly and thinks over his words of caution with calmness and attention it deserves. Even so might be the attitude of the people in this case. But one would be neglecting one's sacred duty and constraints of honesty and sincerity if one does not speak the plain truth in such matters and say with a firm voice that man should be realistic in thinking over such issues and should ask himself boldly whether he really thinks in the depth

of his mind that disarmament will, ultimately, be achieved in fact or he thinks that the total trend of events during the century has been to take the world rapidly to an end so as to begin building a new civilization which has no violence and wars. History shows that major transformations often arise after periods of deep crisis. When old systems collapse under the weight of their contradictions, humanity is compelled to rethink its foundations. The question is whether we will evolve through wisdom or through suffering. The world today stands at a crossroads, one path of continued rivalry and suspicion, the other of introspection and cooperation. History will record which path we chose.

*The author is a spiritual educator & popular columnist for publications across India, Nepal & UK. Views expressed are personal.*

**W**ars in West Asia are often narrated as clashes of ideology, deterrence, and regime change. But oil markets narrate them differently — as a contest over credible threat to sea lanes, terminals, refineries, insurers, and the willingness of commercial shipping to accept risk. That is why this Iran war has produced an energy shock, even before the world can agree on what the closure of the Strait of Hormuz means.

As of March 5, 2026, the war's energy signal is already clear: Brent is at \$84.32 per barrel, and US crude (WTI) is trading above \$78, up more than 43% since December amid prolonged near-halt conditions around the Strait of Hormuz. Moreover, the shock is not confined to crude oil. Stress in refined products, such as diesel, or in freight and insurance channels, considered "secondary" transmission mechanisms, can turn a regional war into global inflation.

The situation is fast-moving and, on some fronts, difficult to independently verify in real time. Yet the market does not require perfect information: it requires only a plausible pathway to disruption. In this war, that pathway is clear. Many oil and gas facilities in the Gulf have been attacked, including the UAE's Fujairah and Mussafah oil terminals, Qatar's Ras Laffan Industrial City LNG facilities and Saudi Arabia's Ras Tanura oil refinery. While this is ongoing, the region has a long history of oil crises.

out the decade. The crisis of the 1980s prompted the United States to initiate Operation Earnest Will, the largest naval convoy operation since World War II, to escort reflagged Kuwaiti tankers through the Strait of Hormuz.

While the current 2026 crisis shares certain characteristics with the 1980s, such as the mining of the strait and attacks on tankers, the intensity of 'Operation Epic Fury' is markedly different. Unlike the 1980s, when the US was not a direct combatant for much of the conflict, the 2026 strikes represent an overt regime-change strategy that has fundamentally shifted the threshold from calibrated deterrence to declared hostility.

**Strait of Hormuz**

The Strait of Hormuz remains the world's most critical energy chokepoint, a geographic bottleneck connecting the Persian Gulf to the Arabian Sea. Approximately 167 km long and only about 33 km wide at its narrowest point, between Iran and the Musandam Peninsula, the strait has shallow waters near the coast that constrain navigation. As a result, tankers must pass through two shipping lanes, approximately 3 km wide, one in each direction, separated by a 2 km buffer zone. What we are witnessing through the functional closure of the Strait of Hormuz is a commercial deterrence rather than an outright military blockade.

In 2024, approximately 20 million barrels per day of petroleum transited through the strait, representing roughly 20% of global petroleum consumption and over one-quarter of global seaborne oil trade.

**THE 2026 CRISIS ECHOES THE 1980s TANKER WAR BUT GOES FURTHER: OPERATION EPIC FURY MARKS A DIRECT US COMBAT ROLE, SHIFTING STRATEGY FROM DETERRENCE TO OPEN HOSTILITY**

**Turbulent History**

The foundations of the modern Iranian oil industry were laid by the Consortium Agreement of 1954, which followed the 1953 coup orchestrated by the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US) to overthrow Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh after he attempted to nationalise Iranian oil.

This agreement divided Iranian oil ownership among a consortium of Western firms: 40% to five American majors (Exxon, Mobil, Socon, Texaco, and Gulf), 40% to British interests (Anglo-Iranian, later BP), 14% to Royal Dutch Shell, and 6% to the Compagnie Française des Pétroles. The framework integrated Iran into the Western economic orbit for 25 years, granting the United States and Britain significant influence over production levels and global pricing until the 1979 Revolution.

The 1979 Iranian Revolution abruptly dismantled the Western-backed oil order in Tehran and introduced a revolutionary regime that unsettled the regional balance of power, prompting Iraq's invasion in September 1980 and setting the stage for the protracted Iran-Iraq War, which would eventually spill into the Persian Gulf's shipping lanes.

**Tanker War (1980-1988)**

The current disruption of shipping in West Asia draws immediate parallels to the 'Tanker War' phase of the Iran-Iraq War. During that conflict, both states targeted commercial vessels to degrade each other's economic capacity. Between 1980 and 1988, approximately 2-5 million barrels per day (mb/d) of production were taken offline at various stages, contributing to sustained price volatility through-

The West Asia Gulf supplies approximately 20% of global seaborne LNG. Moreover, the region also accounts for 16-18% of global seaborne fertilizer exports. LNG shipments through the Strait of Hormuz have been suspended since February 28. West Asia LNG flows predominantly serve Asia.

In January 2026, West Asia accounted for 55% of India's crude imports, about 2.74 million barrels per day, partly because Russian imports eased relative to their earlier peaks. As far as LNG is concerned, India sources around two-thirds of its supply from Qatar, the UAE, and Oman. This concentration becomes especially consequential because LNG cargoes are logistically rigid and contract-linked. Recently, GAIL mentioned that India's LNG suppliers have issued a Force Majeure notice, a legal clause in contracts through which exports can be stopped due to extraordinary events beyond the control of the parties.

Japan is Asia's classic case of Gulf exposure: about 90% of its oil imports come from West

**CRUDE POWER**



**ESCALATING TENSIONS AROUND THE STRAIT OF HORMUZ FOLLOWING THE US-ISRAEL CONFLICT WITH IRAN ARE RATTLING GLOBAL ENERGY MARKETS, EXPOSING ASIA'S HEAVY DEPENDENCE ON GULF OIL**

**Dr ANUDEEP GUJJETI, Dr TANIA ANUPAM PATEL**



Asia, along with 11% of its LNG imports. Including both national stockpiles and private inventories, Japan has reserves sufficient for around 254 days.

South Korea's energy basket is more hybrid in nature — not as oil-concentrated as Japan's, but still heavily exposed. South Korea imports roughly 70% of its oil and about 20% of its LNG from West Asia. In December last year, South Korea's Industry Ministry said the government's strategic petroleum reserves had reached 100 million barrels, with the private sector holding another 95 million barrels. This week, South Korea announced that, taken together, these stocks would cover roughly 208 days of national consumption.

China sits in a different category. It is deeply dependent, but more insulated by scale and storage. Half of China's oil imports, and about one-third of its LNG comes from West Asia, large enough to shape national energy planning, but cushioned by broader supplier optionality and large strategic commercial inventories of three months or around 900 million barrels.

**Current Escalation**

The conflict this time appears different for Asia, given the region's greater dependence on Gulf oil compared to earlier crises in the 1970s and the early 2000s during the Iraq War, when the Strait of Hormuz remained open, and supply chains were largely unaffected. First, the crisis has triggered an insurance-led shutdown, with insurers and shipping firms concluding that the waterway's narrow S-shaped route is too risky to traverse. The Iranian Mission to the United Nations has reiterated its commitment to international law and freedom of navigation, dismissing claims about closing the Strait of Hormuz as baseless, thereby amplifying the narrative battle. Nevertheless, the reverberations of the escalating costs have already been felt by the US. To address the energy crisis faced

**AFTER THE 1953 US-UK-BACKED COUP AGAINST IRANIAN PM MOSSADEGH, THE 1954 CONSORTIUM AGREEMENT DIVIDED IRANIAN OIL AMONG WESTERN FIRMS, BINDING IRAN TO WESTERN ECONOMIC INFLUENCE**

by Asian countries, many of which are its allies, the US has heeded the pressure. President Donald Trump posted on Truth Social that the US Development Finance Corporation (DFC) will provide insurance at a "reasonable price" to ensure maritime energy trade, along with a promise of US naval escorts for tankers if necessary.

This comes in light of the sharp escalation in premiums charged by freight and marine insurance companies, which have risen to nearly 80% due to war-risk exposure. In addition, the withdrawal of marine hull war-risk coverage has imposed further costs on the global supply chain as the situation continues to escalate. To protect European energy interests, France has already promised to deploy two additional ships to the Aspid mission, which includes vessels from France, Italy, and Greece tasked with protecting shipping in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.

Second, Asia today, lies at the centre of global energy demand, driven by its rapidly growing population and the accompanying rise in consumption needs. This vulnerability is further intensified by the region's heavy dependence on long-distance maritime supply routes that pass through various chokepoints, with the Strait of Hormuz being an important one. Consequently, Asian markets — whose energy sources are less diversified compared to those of other regions — remain particularly exposed to supply disruptions, deepening economic vulnerability.

The US also gave India a temporary 30-day waiver period to purchase Russian oil, noting that this waiver does not generate any substantial financial gains to the Russian government, as this is limited to oil shipments stranded at sea. However, this should not be seen as an act of benevolence, but as a strategic move giving the US extra time to pursue regime change and use the outcome to its advantage in the domestic political arena under Donald Trump.

The unfolding escalation in West Asia represents a multidimensional geopolitical and economic risk event. Although oil markets remain the most visible barometer of this crisis, the ramifications across insurance, aviation, and global trade corridors are equally significant. The 'Tanker War' of the 1980s proved that the energy market can adapt to prolonged supply uncertainty. However, the scale and intensity of the current 'Operation Epic Fury' suggest that history is not merely repeating itself but also evolving into a more existential form of confrontation.

For India, maintaining a diversified supply portfolio, particularly with Russia and non-Hormuz producers, and expanding strategic petroleum reserves will be essential to mitigating risks associated with the "effective closure" of the world's most critical energy artery. The present crisis underscores the urgent need for geographically diversified supply chains and accelerated investment in renewable energy to reduce structural vulnerability to external geopolitical shocks.

*(Dr Anudeep Gujjeti is Assistant Professor, Symbiosis Law School, Pune, and Young Leader, Pacific Forum, USA. Dr Tania Anupam Patel is Assistant Professor, Symbiosis Law School, Pune)*



ILLUSTRATION: GURUG



Revisiting the defining artworks  
portraying femininity

ARTS PAGE 3



How gendered stereotypes travel,  
in life and in literature

BOOKS PAGE 4

CHANDIGARH | 8 MARCH 2026

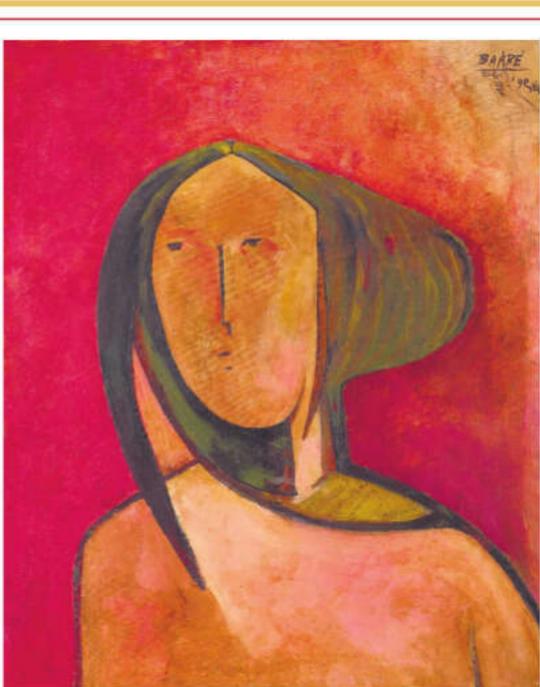


B Prabha, *Untitled*.  
Oil on canvas, 1983.

PHOTOS COURTESY: ASTAGURU

# WHAT WOMEN WANT

If we were to be granted one boon,  
what would we ask for?



Sadanand Bakre, *'Mona Lisa'*. Oil on canvas, 1961.

MRINAL PANDE

**D**URING my frequent interactions with the daily-wage women workers in the informal sector, one question I'd always ask them was, "What do you think you want from your life when you get the time to sit and think (*Jab tumko time milta hai, toh baith kar kya tum sochti ho, tumko apni zindagi se kya chahiye?*)?" The near-uniform reply was, "Where is the time, sister (*Itna time kiske pass hai, Behenji?*)?"

Then, one day, I met an elderly landless worker sitting under a tree supervising many young ones playing in dirt. She said, "Time is what we want but that we seldom get when we are young. We all need time to think about ourselves and our future, *Behenji*. But the house work and the children and the fields also have to be cared for. At this age, when I can sit under a tree and think, I see the rich have time. So they plan for their seven generations. We, the landless labourers, earning uneven daily wages (*dihadi*), must keep running all the time. How can we pause to think even what our next meal of the day will be?"

Time, I realised, is the big marker between the rich and poor, between the powerful and the powerless, that Amartya Sen had once said he had been seeking as the wall that separated men and women, the powerful and the powerless.

Women have given birth to all human life on Earth and most of the labour in the world is done by women. These are universal facts. Despite all the rhetoric about empowering *Matas*, *Behens* and *Betis*, the fact is that from metro towns to distant rural areas, most women are raising children alone while also doing various domestic chores before stepping out and going to find work. This is the human condition of most young women — both home workers and those who work for wages.

Here, joy coexists with pain, frustration with fulfilment. And most of us have no time to sit and reflect on our lives objectively, so we accept it as a matter of course. Few, very few, realise that wifehood and motherhood, and workplace hierarchies and differential wages, as they experience them, are carefully crafted social constructs, not a result of their natural human condition any more than say, slavery or rape.

Whether daily-wage G-RAM-G workers or powerful editors, throughout our married lives, women are counselled to relax and remain calm, acting as all-forgiving Madonnas. No one pauses to consider the loneliness of women who routinely undergo the psychic crisis of losing their natal home and being catapulted in the midst of a different family, followed by child-bearing which brings another confusing period full of power and utter powerlessness, of being taken over totally by motherhood and going to work bewildered and exhausted most of the time.

If we were to be granted one boon, what would we ask for? The question was asked in the editorial dining room of a major publishing house

where I then worked. My answer was, a wife! Someone who'd do for me what yours do for you when you get back. The whole house hushes when you enter, cups of tea and edibles arrive without asking for, no one hands you a list of stuff needed for a school project, no voice from kitchen comes, "*Bibiji, gas khatam ho gayi hai, sabzi bhi bus aaj ke hee liye hogi.*"

If you've seen those videos of deranged young women taken to Balaji temple or some *dargah* for treating their madness, who writhe and shake their hair loose, roll in dust screaming gibberish, you realise how constantly being a woman in the socially approved sense has undone so many of us.

If young working mothers and wives were not always running, finishing chores, listening to queries, complaints and attention-seeking relatives, they, too, would sit and think about themselves and the wide, wide world outside. They could then begin to discover ways of thinking that would help them overcome the organised networks of men who control and pre-define their labour and working hours nearly everywhere. From homes to fields, factories to newsrooms, rules are still made for men by men and implemented by older men on ground.

When one asks, why is it that what women do is not valued on par with what men do, a 2025 *Time Use* survey by PIB tells us that in the age group of 15-59, women spent a whopping 315 minutes each day in unpaid domestic work, most of which (41 per cent) consisted of caregiving for family. In contrast, men spent only half that time (21 per cent) in similar activity. And 75 per cent males were employed in work they were paid for in contrast to a mere 25 per cent of women.

The International Labour Organisation survey also reveals that homemakers do not sit on sofas and gossip with neighbours and watch TV all day either. They spend 7.5 hours each day in unpaid domestic work. Even women who work outside for paid jobs spend an average of 5.8 hours doing unpaid domestic work. Men in the same age group spend only 2.7 per cent of their time doing unpaid chores around homes. In Rajasthan and Haryana, 85 per cent of unpaid domestic work is done by women.

Even given the limitations of the "wages for domestic work" theory, these figures make it amply clear that not only are women at the peripheries of paid work, but what they do to run homes and bring up children and caring for the sick and the elderly, carries little value for their own families. So, it's a given that houses will be ringing with, "where's my breakfast, my briefcase, school bag, eye glasses, my medicine?" — all queries aimed at the woman herself running against time, often on an empty stomach.

It is time to correct women's opinion of themselves as essentially flawed beings who can't get things done just so. We must start looking seriously at sexuality, politics and law from our own perspective.

Here the true meaning of the traditional image of Goddess Mahakali from Tantra literature begins to make sense. She is, as Shiva calls her, 'primordial

power', *Adi Shakti*. She will not be guided by Time but has crushed it under her feet when she sets out roaming in interesting places women have been barred from: forested mountains, to caves of dacoits, brothels to cremation grounds.

This conqueror of Time defies all norms that spell a manmade ideal woman. She is dark, she has discarded clothes, gold or silver jewellery, and wears instead a garland of human skulls around her neck and holds up a machete dripping blood. She is a presence totally at home outside the moral order, unbounded by any scriptural limits.

Kali signifies how the current legitimacy of a manmade State has stood at women's expense. A theory of State from women's perspective has barely been imagined, because women have been made to run to stay still. Once we realise how we can control our agency, the question then will be, how we discard age-old assumptions about home, work, and women and their relationship to productivity. To recall that the earliest production centres for cooked processed food, textiles, wool-lens, and various commodities for sale were not within factories but homes. Women worked there alongside men and had a near-monopoly on brewing and textile weaving by hand.

Work was pushed into factories when the mechanical revolution began. So homes and the gendered division of labour, as they exist today, are creations of industrialisation. And it was then that the physical and psychiatric burden on women with children began to rise.

Now that new technology has eased housework and most younger women have finished school, there is a new restlessness in the air. When old-style families are shrinking and young women are carrying maternal burdens for shorter spells, it is time to think of truly gender-neutral spaces for ourselves, and then to start rebuilding the State from the ground up.

*"What do we want from each other  
after we have told our stories  
do we want to be healed, do we want  
mossy quiet stealing over our scars  
do we want  
the all-powerful unfrightening sister  
who will make the pain go away  
mother's voice in the hallway  
you've done it right  
the first time darling  
you will never need  
to do it again.  
Thunder grumbles on the horizon  
I buy time with another story  
a pale blister of air  
cadences of dead flesh  
obscure the vowels.*

(Audre Lorde, *'There Are No Honest Poems About Dead Women'*)

What you need is to grab and control Time, the all-powerful unfrightening Mahakali answers. Time, love, is all there is to power!

— The writer is a veteran journalist



THE WRITER IN THE DRIVER'S SEAT.

## A woman driver in the male zone

GARIMA AVTAR

**W**HEN I slide into the driver's seat, I'm doing more than starting an engine. I'm entering a space that society still sees as a "male zone".

For women, the road is not just a way to get from A to B; it's a stage where every move is watched and judged. You can feel the pressure the moment you adjust your mirrors — an awareness that you're not just a driver, but a "woman driver" on trial.

I've seen this happen many times. A man makes a mistake, like cutting someone off, forgetting to signal, or missing a turn, and it's brushed off as a bad day or a moment of distraction. A woman makes the same mistake, and suddenly it reflects on her entire gender. We aren't seen as individuals; we're treated like representatives. Every hesitation or careful check of the blind spot becomes a headline in someone else's narrow story.

The "women can't drive" jokes might seem

often just a lack of opportunity and safety. Confidence isn't innate; it's built through uninterrupted practice. But for many women, that practice is disrupted by constant calculations. We think about the "what ifs" — the dark roads, breakdowns in unfamiliar areas, and harassment that has nothing to do with driving but everything to do with being a woman in public. We don't avoid night driving because we can't see the road; we avoid it because we can't trust the environment. When society misinterprets our caution as incompetence, it overlooks the reality we have to navigate. But the facts tell a much kinder story than the stereotypes suggest. Data from IIT-Delhi's TRIPP report and the IIHS show that men take more risks, whether it's speeding, driving under the influence of alcohol, or not wearing a seatbelt. In India, the male-to-female fatality ratio in road accidents is about 6 to 1. Men drive more miles, but they also drive with a level of aggression that the data shows is deadly.

Importantly, there is an unfairness that few discuss: research indicates women are 47 per cent more likely to be seriously injured in a crash. Why? For decades, safety features and crash-test dummies have been designed around the average male body. We're not the ones making the roads dangerous; the roads and vehicles often aren't even built to keep us safe. We are surviving in an environment that was never designed with us in mind, yet we're the ones mocked for our "lack of skill".

We can break this cycle through normalisation rather than arguments. We need to see women in every role — not just in the passenger seat, but also driving taxis, delivery trucks, interstate buses, and ambulances. Visibility is the key to dismantling stereotypes. When it becomes normal to see a woman driving a heavy vehicle, the jokes will lose their power.

We need to stop treating a woman driving as a "statement" or a "brave act" and start seeing her as a neighbour, a professional, and a driver. Driving is a skill, not a matter of gender. It involves discipline, spatial awareness, and experience — all of which are neutral.

The real improvement our road culture needs isn't better technology, it's empathy. When we stop requiring women to "prove" their right to be on the road, we don't just get more drivers — we create a road culture that is more patient, more equal, and ultimately more humane. The goal isn't just to drive; it's to drive without the weight of the world's judgment in the rearview mirror.

— *The writer is a former extreme rally driver and an automobile content creator*

Every move on the road is watched and judged; we fight against a mindset that expects us to fail

like harmless fun, but they create a heavy atmosphere of confirmation bias. People look for proof of the stereotype. If a woman takes an extra 10 seconds to parallel park, it's a story shared at dinner, often accompanied by eye rolls. But if she drives flawlessly for years, navigating difficult mountain roads or busy city intersections, she becomes invisible. This is the tax we pay — the feeling that we have to be twice as good to be seen as "average". We fight against a mindset that expects us to fail.

In the chaotic rhythm of Indian traffic, the road becomes a stage for over-watching. I've seen women honked at the moment a light turns green or crowded by bikers in narrow lanes who assume she will yield. It's an exhausting double standard: if you follow the rules, you're "timid" or "clueless"; if you assert yourself, you're "aggressive" or "trying too hard". Most women I know are worn out not just by driving, but by the mental energy needed to navigate the road and the social pressure of being observed. You aren't just managing the car, you're navigating the ego of every driver around you.

What some see as a "lack of confidence" is

# LEADING THE WAY

Be it monuments or mountains, women guides are breaking barriers

KAVITA KANAN CHANDRA

**W**HETHER you visit the Taj Mahal or go trekking in Ladakh, chances are you will find a woman guide leading a group of travellers. Just a few decades back, women were rarely seen in the male-dominated field of tour guiding. Most were confined to city tours in the metros.

The long hours away from home, scepticism from family and society, and erratic payments hardly made it a "respectable" profession then. But, as times changed, women tour guides, too, began to gain acceptance as professionals.

A Melbourne-based company that offers immersive trips across the world actively recruits women guides. In 2016, Usha Mary seized the opportunity to become its first woman tour leader from South India. "Though my husband, Aathi, motivated me, our families vehemently opposed it," says Usha, who grew up in the countryside near Madurai. When she chose to work as a certified tour guide, leaving her five-year job as a college lecturer, she had to cross cultural barriers and endure snide remarks. Married at 29 into a different religion, the pressure to have children was immense. "I was fed up and couldn't handle it," she recalls. Being a tour guide gave her a sense of strength as she met travellers from different cultures. "Now, for six to seven months, I am away from home, leading back-to-back trips," says Usha.

For Monika Sharma, a history postgraduate and pan-India tourist guide from Agra since 2010, it was the gender bias in the tourism industry that frustrated her. "They would call me only when there was a solo woman traveller, not as a general guide, so I hardly worked twice a month," says Monika. Now freelancing for a US-based tourism platform, she leads customised tours. "It is a nice platform — they value us and pay better wages," she says.

Over the past two decades, several foreign and domestic tour companies as well as large hotels have begun hiring women guides. The rise of women-only travel groups and solo women travellers, too, has given a boost to women guides.

For a woman visiting from abroad, a fellow woman guide often brings warmth and understanding. If you scroll through the list of licensed tourist guides on the website of the Tourism Guide Association of Mumbai, more than half are women. Many are fluent in foreign languages — French, Spanish, German, Japanese, Russian, Italian and even Thai.

Neha Rai, a 24-year-old trekking and mountaineering guide from Sikkim, even leads all-male groups. "In mountaineering, what matters is skill," she says, confidently. Having lost her father early, the mountain girl from Dentam village battled hardship and poverty, earning pocket money by guiding tourists in the hills. Her grit led her to the mountaineering institute in Darjeeling, and today she works as a trekking and mountaineering guide in Sikkim and Ladakh.

One of the pioneering professional trekking guides from Ladakh, 43-year-old



USHA MARY, TOUR GUIDE FROM MADURAI (IN SAREE), WITH TOURISTS.



GUIDES AT TADоба ANDHARI TIGER RESERVE.



MONIKA SHARMA (EXTREME RIGHT)



TREKKERS GET THEMSELVES CLICKED WITH NEHA RAI (2ND FROM LEFT).



LADAKH'S PIONEERING TREKKING GUIDE THINLAS CHOROL (THIRD FROM RIGHT).

Thinlas Chorol, leads both women-only and mixed groups. Hailing from the small village of Takmachik, she got training at the Nehru Institute of Mountaineering in Uttarkashi. She longed to trek professionally, but the only option for women was guiding tourists through monasteries and cultural sites. Determined to change that, she founded a travel company in 2009. She promotes community-based eco-tourism, hosting guests in village homestays.

Sometimes, government initiatives can spark interest in professions women had never considered. Content with domesticity, Niranjana Meshram from a village in the buffer zone of Tadoba Andhari Tiger Reserve in Maharashtra had never imagined birdwatching could be so fascinating. "In 2019, the forest department organised

a week-long birding workshop," says Niranjana. Seven local women were selected as birding guides. Now an avid birder, she has documented around 200 bird species in the region. She credits ecologists Anirudh Chaoji and Pooja Pawar, who train local communities around the forest to generate livelihoods.

Yangchen Töngden Lepcha, who runs a tour and travel company in Sikkim, has been associated with the state's tourism sector since 2013. As a mentor, she says she has seen women guides evolve over time.

While Neha says she receives strong support, others admit the struggle continues. Yet, given the right opportunities, they believe guiding can be a fulfilling career for women who are passionate about travel.

— *The writer is a freelance contributor*

### CAPTION CONTEST 1552

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, along with your address.

### SELECTED ENTRIES FOR CAPTION CONTEST 1551



SPECTRUM MARCH 1 ISSUE (SEE PHOTO)

Twitter feed — Alisha Chandra, Chandigarh

At your beak and call — Charandeep Shergill, Mohali

Dedicated server — Rajiv Sharma via epaper, Amritsar

Flying feeder — Bahadur Singh via epaper, Jalandhar

Aerial refuelling — Suresh Chand, Chandigarh

## A chef reflects on balancing motherhood, fatigue, and the relentless demands of the job Pregnancy, the hardest shift in kitchens

ANAHITA DHONDY

**L**ET'S just start by saying — I don't know if I would have been able to build a career if I got pregnant in my mid-20s as a chef setting up kitchens and working the pass.

Sadly, professional kitchens are not designed with pregnancy in mind. There is no option of working from home. They often require you to do long hours of physical labour, work with heavy equipment and keep up with the pressure of service. There are smells and ingredients and a whole lot of nausea.

Pregnancy introduces the female body to a very new set of demands. The adrenaline of a busy line and the precision of playing does not land the same way when you're carrying a baby.

For many young women entering the culinary industry, having a child is not something they think about in the early years. The first decade of a chef's career is about proving yourself by working long shifts, taking on the tough stations and showing that you can handle the same physical workload as anyone else on the line.

While this is an industry still largely dominated by men, women do experience more pressure to demonstrate resilience. However, unlike men, they are also navigating a biological clock that will not wait for the perfect moment between



The writer at work. For most young women in the culinary industry, having a child is not something they think about in the early years.

restaurant openings.

When pregnancy does happen, the realities of kitchen work become immediately apparent. A line cook cannot work from home. The work requires being on your feet for hours, constantly navigating heat, smoke and strong aromas. Even staying hydrated and taking timely meals can become difficult during a busy service.

In the early months of pregnancy, fatigue and nausea are common symptoms. Imagine managing that while surrounded by intense kitchen smells, sizzling pans and the pace of service. Especially dirty plates and pans always got my goat.

From my personal experience, even routine tasks can become tricky. I was working at Gardin during my pregnancy and could not climb the stairs to get to the kitchen on the first floor. The team there — Manvee and Digvijay Bedi — helped me navigate this new phase. I continued with all the staff meetings and trials downstairs until I finally had a go-ahead from the doctor to start climbing stairs to the kitchen on the first floor. It wasn't easy but it worked out because of the leadership and team work.

Many chefs find themselves needing to adjust their work patterns — stepping back from physically demanding stations, modifying schedules, or temporarily shifting to less strenuous roles.

Thankfully, I was running my own consultancy, so I found it a bit easier to navigate due to the flexibility it allowed. I was able to plan ahead and complete my tasks before my baby arrived. Meetings could be adjusted and responsibilities delegated. But if you are a chef working in an organisation for more than 80 days, you are entitled to six months of paid maternity leave.

For the majority of women working as cooks in commercial kitchens, that flexibility simply doesn't exist. Pregnancy also introduces a long list of health considerations. Chefs must navigate food safety in a deeply personal way — avoiding high-mercury fish, steering clear of allergens, and often refraining from tast-

ing certain dishes, all the while running kitchens that revolve around constant tasting and adjustment.

And then comes the postpartum period — a time when the body is still healing, sleep is scarce, and the demands of a newborn are immense. Returning to a commercial kitchen after that can feel like stepping back into an environment that hasn't paused to accommodate these realities.

Many women take time away. Some step into less physically demanding roles such as consulting, teaching, etc. Others leave the industry entirely. This may explain why, despite more women entering culinary schools and kitchens than ever before, far fewer remain in the industry long-term. The problem is not a lack of passion. It is often a lack of structure and support.

Pregnancy does not make someone less capable of being a chef. But the current systems within many professional kitchens make it incredibly difficult to balance both identities at the same time. They are both extremely demanding.

If the culinary world wants to retain talented women throughout their careers, it must start asking a different question. As an industry built on creativity and adaptation, how can professional kitchens evolve to better support chefs through pregnancy, parenthood, and the many life stages that follow?

— *The writer is a chef and author*

# Masterclass on feminine frames

UMA NAIR

**M**ARCH as a month belongs to women and the moment you think of women, you naturally ponder over the male gaze. It has manifested on canvas in varied forms. No one has created as many feminine portraits as Pablo Picasso. His exhibition, 'Picasso and Paper', at the Royal Academy of Art, London, in 2020 was a seminal lesson in art history. For the artist, paper was more than a mere tool for exploring his ideas; it was also a material with limitless possibilities. He experimented with everything — from newsprint and napkins to decorative wallpaper.

Art history shows us effortlessly expressive drawings, paintings as well as sculptures to colossal collages in a constant drive to invent and innovate the feminine archetype.

"There are only two types of women — goddesses and doormats," said Picasso. His history with them is known. First he would idolise them, then treat them like scum. At the London exhibition, his portrait of Dora Maar stood out as testimony.

The male gaze and artworks that reimagine the archetype



TYEB MEHTA, UNTITLED ('RECLINING NUDE')



PICASSO, PORTRAIT OF DORA MAAR



HUSAIN'S 'FIGURES IN A FIELD'

literal and metaphorical story of women at work. The tall accompanying male figure appears frequently in Husain's iconography of the time. The faceless human perhaps is his own mother whose passed away early.

This epic canvas is a record of life and art in India in a way that synergises the past, the present and the future in a poetic manner, creating narratives through stylisation with unparalleled lyricism.

**TYEB MEHTA'S 'RECLINING NUDE'**

In his early notes, Tyeb Mehta said: "Expression was all-important [...] Expressionism appeals to the viewer directly... Munch, Kokoschka, Emil Nolde weren't painters in the tradition of painting, and they were 'gut' painters. I was painting from the gut."

His 'Reclining Nude' (1959), auctioned at Christie's in 2022, is an image of love, life and hope. Mehta first travelled to Europe for a few months in 1954, where he visited Paris and London to study the European Masters. He was so influenced by this trip that, in 1959, he returned to Europe for an extended stay in London for five years.

**KRISHEN KHANNA'S 'SPRING'**

Krishen Khanna's rare portrait of a nude in the TIFR Art Collection, Mumbai, is a masterpiece in compositional clarity and mood. Krishen's study is one of admiration, created within a configuration of a few tones of ochre and lucid lines. Indeed, Krishen and Tyeb were very close friends over many years. It was Krishen the Rockefeller artist who opened the way for his friends of the Progressives to be sent to the West on Rockefeller scholarships.

**FN SOUZA'S 'VIOLET HEAD'**

Souza's 'Violet Head' (1950), also belonging to the Kumar Gallery collection, is yet another feminine delight in both enchantment and elusive elegance. Details and a vivacity of vision both create its own aura. This work was a gift to Virendra Kumar, who was his art dealer for more than 40 years. For someone who often attacked the feminine subject, this work celebrates the portrait and gets into an exotic frame of mind and subject.

**PATRIARCHAL IDEOLOGY**

Critics and scholars say that patriarchal ideology has long defined how we perceive feminine nudity, modesty as well as sensuality.

We know that over centuries, nudity celebrates the physical and emotional being of a woman as a subject. It indicates where they are and how they look and feel at that moment. Then it wouldn't be wrong to say that in India, we can view the feminine subject as a serene, humble haven over the male gaze radiating in raw or imperfect glory.

— **The writer is an author, art critic and curator**



GAITONDE, UNTITLED

Created in 1938, 'The Seated Woman (Dora)' was the *piece de resistance* amongst portraits. A creation of ink, gouache and coloured chalk on paper, it commenced the collapse of Picasso's explorations of the plastic form into a more rigid phase. The portrait is filled with an intricate network of web-like lines that interconnect shapes and colour, creating alternative rhythmic patterns and tensions within the dynamics of contours.

*A litany of delightful works meets our gaze as we turn to our own Indian masters:*

**VS GAITONDE'S STROKES**

Gaitonde's rare Untitled painting of a feminine form was part of an auction many moons ago. Replete with many details, this expression of contemplation and a long plait

is indeed an image of many moods in reverie. The finer elements of additional richness in intensity and myriad moorings all come together to create a setting of an early passage of time. For Gaitonde the thinker and Gaitonde the man of gravitas, here is an image that sets the tone of a page in personal history. A reading of a moment in framing

the feminine tells us that the handling of the subject is what created its own history.

**MF HUSAIN'S VILLAGE BELLE**

A rare masterpiece in the Kumar Gallery collection is Husain's 'Figures in a Field' (1959). Each figure in this vignette represents familiar tropes quintessential to his

practice. He brings together the familiar village woman, iconic stylised male, and the cubist rendering of a tree. The treatment of colour and contour creates a storyboard of simplicity and fervour.

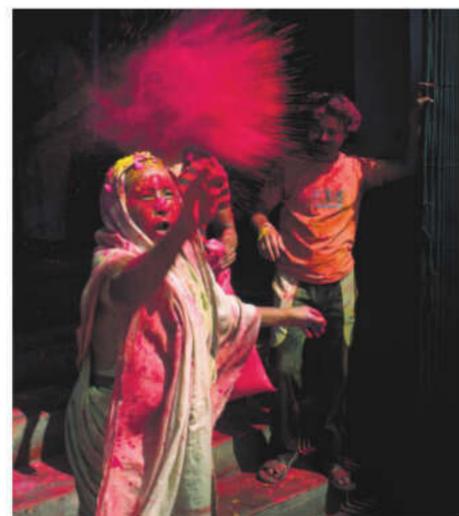
Husain celebrates the beauty of India in its villages and the eternal quality of conversation. This image is like a narrative telling the



Colour returns where silence once lived — Holi becomes a celebration of reclaimed joy.



In the quiet glow of devotion, dignity slowly finds its way back.



No longer behind, no longer silent.

## A RETURN TO COLOUR

Photographer Moushume K Jha's images give a glimpse of Holi among the widows of Vrindavan

**H**OLI, the festival of colours, is celebrated across India as a time of joy, renewal, and collective abandon. Yet for generations of widows living in Vrindavan, the festival once carried a very different meaning. It was a day that passed quietly on the margins of society, where tradition dictated restraint rather than celebration.

I have been documenting the lives of the widows of Vrindavan for more than a decade, since around 2012 or 2013. What began as a photographic engagement gradually evolved into a deeply personal association. Over the years, my camera has not merely recorded events; it has witnessed lives unfolding with courage, resilience, and dignity.

Vrindavan, the sacred city of Lord Krishna, has long been home to thousands of widows who arrived here after being abandoned, displaced, or left with few choices by the rigid social norms surrounding widowhood. Within orthodox traditions, a widow was expected to renounce worldly pleasures. Colourful clothing, adornment,

and participation in festivals were often denied to her. The white sari became both a symbol of renunciation and a reminder of social exclusion.

For many years, Holi existed for these women as something observed from a distance. While the rest of the country immersed itself in clouds of colour, they remained bound by conventions that discouraged laughter, festivity, and visibility.

Over the past decade, however, a quiet transformation has been unfolding. Several organisations, including Sulabh International and other non-profit initiatives, have worked to restore dignity and opportunity to these women. Beyond providing shelter, these efforts have focused on rehabilitation through vocational training, education, and skill development, enabling many widows to move toward self-reliance.

Equally important has been the effort to reintegrate them into the rhythms of social life. Festivals such as Diwali, Holi, and Raksha Bandhan are now celebrated collectively. The women have travelled to places of historical and cultural importance, including the Taj Mahal and the

Kashi temple — experiences that once seemed unimaginable. Some have even participated in fashion shows, walking with quiet pride and reclaiming a public presence long denied to them.

Last year, my work on the widows of Vrindavan was included in the book 'Widows: A Global History' by the renowned Dutch author Mineke Schipper.

Today, Holi carries a deeper meaning for these women. In the courtyards of the ashrams, clouds of gular rise alongside showers of marigold, rose, and jasmine petals. Through my lens, I often see a moment when a white sari briefly disappears beneath drifting colour and falling petals — a quiet image of transformation. As the colours settle, the scene speaks of something profound: dignity slowly reclaimed, belonging gently restored, and life returning, quietly and beautifully, in colour.

— **Moushume K Jha has been working in the fields of documentary, journalism, travel, tourism, architecture, corporate communications, for 25 years** (Column curated by Aditya Arya, founder-director, Museo Camera, Gurugram)



From the margins of Vrindavan to the courtyards of history.

# BOOKS

## How gendered stereotypes travel

The phrases we inherit carry assumptions so ordinary, we barely notice them; over time, repetition turns habit

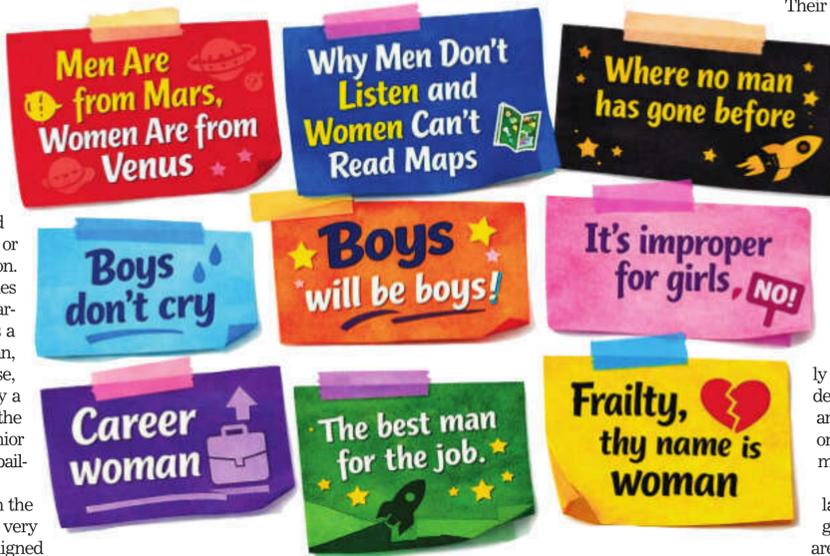
BINDU MENON

RECENTLY, out of curiosity, I ran a small experiment. I asked an artificial intelligence tool to write short love stories. Each prompt was simple — two characters, identified only by their professions. So I would type: write a love story between a CEO and a professional in the same company, or a politician and a journalist and so on. Largely, and unsurprisingly, the stories followed familiar gendered hierarchies. The CEO was almost always a man. So was the doctor, the politician, the editor, the judge. The nurse, teacher, baker or florist was usually a woman. Even in cases where the woman was the CEO, her male junior (and love interest) would be the one bailing her out of some sticky situation.

To be fair, there were times when the hierarchies flipped. But they were very few. In most cases, the characters aligned neatly with conventional roles. When prompted with a classical musician and a tabla player, the former was cast as female. The system defaulted to what felt culturally familiar: authority and action rendered as male, care and assistance coded as female. The machine had not invented these roles. It had simply learned and reproduced them.

The exercise was minor, almost playful, and not an extensive one. Yet it suggests something larger. Language does not merely describe the world, it tidily organises it. The phrases we inherit carry assumptions so ordinary that we barely notice them. Over time, repetition turns habit into truth.

Take the famous line from 'Hamlet': "Frailty, thy name is woman". In the play, Hamlet speaks in anguish, reeling from what he sees as his mother's betrayal after she marries his uncle. In dramatic context, it is a son's bitter outburst. In cultural context, it emerged from an era when gender hierarchy was not just social practice but moral doctrine. Over time, however, the line drifted into common usage, acquiring the authority of a proverb. A moment of personal fury ossified into a generalised observation about women. This is how gendered tropes travel. They



Words need constant revision if we are to move towards a gender-equal society

move from literature into everyday discourse and from there into hardened expectation. Expressions such as "boys don't cry", "boys will be boys", "it's improper for girls", "career woman" or "mothering" appear casual, even affectionate. Yet they create gendered stereotypes. Strength, rationality and leadership are deemed masculine. Vulnerability, emotional expression and nurturing are slotted as feminine. The effect is not simply one of difference but of value. Traits associated with masculinity tend to be treated as normative and authoritative, while those associated with femininity are framed as secondary or excessive.

This hierarchy is reinforced through what linguists call "marking". A CEO is often pre-

sumed male unless described as a "woman CEO". Conversely, a "nurse" is assumed female, requiring the modifier "male nurse" when the expectation is reversed. In positions of authority, masculinity functions as the default and in caregiving roles, femininity does. In both cases, gender is pre-determined before the individual appears.

As author-activist bell hooks (who writes her name in lowercase so that rather than her identity, attention remains toward her ideas) observed, "language is also a place of struggle" in a patriarchal world. It quietly establishes who belongs in positions of power and who must justify their presence. Popular culture amplifies this architecture of difference. Take book titles such as 'Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus' or 'Why Men Don't Listen and Women Can't Read Maps'. These frame contrast as biologically ordained and inevitable. But this language of inevitability neatly conceals the politics of hierarchy.

In its far extreme sense, this coding becomes explicit in online spaces such as the manosphere, particularly among incels.

Their vocabulary and hostility reduce women to caricature. Yet this aggression can be read as an amplification of familiar biases and binaries.

Empirical research confirms that these patterns are not incidental. A few years ago, a cohort of universities did a large machine learning study analysing 3.5 million books published between 1900 and 2008 — amounting to roughly 11 billion words. The study found that adjectives such as "beautiful" and "sexy" were disproportionately used to describe women, while "brave", "rational" and "righteous" were largely reserved for men. The words used to describe women alluded more to appearance than those used for men. The study only highlighted in statistical terms what many already knew.

Recent research examining large language models across multiple languages shows similar tendencies. Men are framed as leaders and professionals, women as empathetic or domestic. Even AI systems trained on vast textual archives reproduce these binaries. If machines echo stereotypes, it is because the stereotypes are embedded in the data.

None of this means that gendered reference must disappear or even will. The question is not erasure but about tying moral value to gender. Courage is not inherently masculine, nor is empathy inherently feminine. Small linguistic shifts can signal broader transformations. When the famous line from the sci-fi series 'Star Trek' changed from "where no man has gone before" to the gender-inclusive "where no one has gone before", the symbolic field widened. When universities encourage the use of neutral titles such as "Dr" or "Prof" rather than gendered forms, or when the Supreme Court releases a handbook to ensure misogynistic language is avoided in court rulings, the aim is not just to edit our vocabulary but to recalibrate social norms.

The words we inherit are powerful, but not immutable. They need constant revision and refinement if we are to move towards a gender-equal society.

— The writer is based in Bengaluru



### BACKFLAP



**TWO BANDRA GIRLS BUY A FARM**  
by Arti Dworkadas.  
Westland.  
Pages 218. ₹499

Pumped with post-lockdown confidence in her green thumb, Arti Dworkadas said yes to her friend Suzann's hare-brained scheme of buying land. From negotiating with sceptical villagers and unruly cows, every misstep becomes a lesson, and every harvest a tiny miracle. Yet beneath the comedy of errors lies something deeper: a fresh look at what it truly means to work with one's hands, live close to the land and make a small but genuine difference in the world. This is a laugh-out-loud chronicle of their journey so far.



**BREAKING THE RULES**  
by Vinita Gupta.  
Westland.  
Pages 194. ₹399

Vinita Gupta was in her twenties when she left India to work in the US, where she co-founded Digital Link Corporation, leading it for nearly two decades. In this memoir, she writes about the struggles and triumphs of business innovation as well as the complexity of life as a wife and mother attempting to balance work and personal commitments. But more than that, it is her journey into discovering who she is.

## Abuse, survival, and justice

SONYA J NAIR

READING 'Nobody's Girl: A Memoir of Surviving Abuse and Fighting for Justice' has left me confused. I don't know whether to weep for Virginia Roberts Giuffre, or to be angry about the systems that have allowed this abuse to happen and to be perpetuated, or to feel relieved that this brave story of survival has not got lost in the rush of data that we are bombarded with daily. I am, at any rate, grateful that the optics of war, hate-mongering, whataboutery, posturing have not distracted the world from sitting up and taking notice of what the entitled have gone about doing to the poor, the marginalised and the vulnerable.

The book opens with a note from Giuffre's collaborator Amy Wallace, who has spoken about the challenges she faced while writing the book. Much of the difficulty comes from trauma: reliving the abuse for Giuffre, and dealing with her story for Wallace. In the segment written by Wallace after Giuffre's death, there are sections which give details the latter did not want revealed at the time. This makes the book a complex entity. The picture that Giuffre paints of her husband Robbie is different from Wallace's. But I suppose one must focus on the 'bigger abuse', as it were.

Giuffre goes into painful detail about the sort of abuse she was subjected to right from a young age. Be it her father or the man she was to call Uncle Forrest, or the family and friends who were complicit through their silence. Jenna, as Giuffre was, ironically, fondly referred to, never had anyone she could trust. There are clear indications of victim blaming, intimidation, cruelty and deprivation that she experienced as a child and that had an impact on her for the rest of her life. It is also an indication that one does not have to be an all-powerful Jeffrey Epstein to bear down on a young girl. Even a common male can bring that about. And that makes one look at the world in a very different light.

The history of trafficking in the book indicates how easy it is for predators to spot victims and lure them with the promise of stability. Giuffre narrates the various ways in which she was exploited by the men she came across in the first round of her abuse. She moves back with her family and even

has a working relationship with her parents up until she starts work at Mar-a-Lago. She mentions Trump and how she met Maxwell and Epstein. One can see the insidious ways in which young girls are groomed and trafficked or used in disgusting and potentially life-threatening ways. Billionaires, princes, scientists, academics, all take their turn with this child. Sometimes, repeatedly.

Giuffre narrates a recruitment scheme as well, where she too begins to mentally check out girls for Epstein. She even travelled to Thailand on such missions. It must be mentioned that Wallace employed fact-checkers and met witnesses to corroborate the story.

'Nobody's Girl' is shocking, not just because it details the life of a woman who faced situations of ultimate degradation and came back to take down the monoliths who took away her childhood and, indeed, her life. It is shocking because it makes us understand the intricacies of the mind of a victim and tells us in no uncertain terms that the abuse tilts the victim in ways others cannot comprehend. Giuffre mentions: "It probably goes without saying that what my father and his friend Forrest had done to me when I was a child, being trafficked by Epstein and Maxwell was painfully triggering. To the extent that I saw the two of them as pseudo-parental figures, their disregard for my welfare as they lent me out for sex made me feel a familiar strain of worthlessness. But at times that familiarity was weirdly comforting."

She writes about finding Epstein ogling at Nadia, another young girl. "...this stirred up some feelings in me. All those stories I'd told myself about being needed... about being the only one who could take care of him — all that was so obviously untrue. As much as I wanted to disappear from Epstein's life, it stung to be so easily replaced."

I had to pause reading and reflect on this. The devolving of the human mind to give up its sense of autonomy is one of the saddest things. Wallace and Giuffre have trained a searchlight into such a mind. And what emerges is more darkness. The book mirrors life itself: bleak moments interspersed with Giuffre's recollections of her calm family life, the support from her in-laws, the laughter of her children and an anchor in her husband.

'Nobody's Girl' is a relevant book not only because it peels open the structures of power and shows us the cogs that move, but also because it complicates our smug binary ideas about victimhood and how they can "just escape if they tried". Happy Women's Day.  
— The reviewer teaches at All Saints' College, Thiruvananthapuram

## A toolkit to unlearn sexism

JANAKI SRINIVASAN

THE countdown to the International Women's Day has become, ironically, a rather trying time for feminists the world over. Between rebutting accolades heaped on a model of womanhood feminism has sought to dismantle for centuries and responding to the increasingly shrill voice of men's rights activism, threatening to undo the movement's hard-won gains, they find themselves having to draw upon their last reserves of patience. A certain weariness has come to characterise feminists today; even young women in their twenties feel the exhaustion of having to make the same arguments and offer the same explanations as their forbearer grandmothers.

Harshveer Jain's book comes with a promise to ease some of this burden. Addressed to men, its agenda is to not just peel away the misconceptions and stereotypes popularly associated with feminism and feminists, but to guide men into the basics of a feminist analysis of self and society that they can apply to their everyday life. This has become all the more necessary given that a crisis in gender relations characterises contemporary society.

Thanks to the tangible, albeit uneven, progress made towards gender equality over the past century, whole generations of women have been raised to value autonomy and self-fulfilment and expect equality in personal, professional and public life. Yet men continued to be schooled in patriarchal gendered norms and now find themselves ill-equipped to meet these expectations. Going by the public debate, the 21st century is clearly occupied with 'the Men's Question'.

Jain's book aims to provide men with a starter toolkit to navigate this social terrain. It rightly surmises that leaving aside the extremes of the performative male and the manosphere, most men will benefit from the information and training they missed out on due to the gender gap in socialisation.

Using a range of analogies and thoughtful illustrations, the short, crisp sections of the book adopt a conversational style to explain how patriarchy works as a structure of privilege and power: From consent to intersectionality, from gender pay gap to unpaid labour, from religion to popular culture, from the family to the educational system, the prose unlocks these concepts and themes as part of answers to the FAQs on feminism. It passionately argues that patriarchy



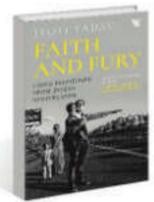
**PUTTING THE TOILET SEAT DOWN: A MAN'S GUIDE TO FEMINISM**  
by Harshveer Jain.  
Penguin Random House.  
Pages 160. ₹499

causes harm to men by boxing them into fixed gender roles, preventing them from exploring their potential or engaging in meaningful human connections, and condemning them to emotional dissonance and loneliness. Feminism, it follows, is good for men, so they should be not just allies but participants in a movement that opens the pathway of liberation.

For most part, the arguments flow smoothly. To my mind, the book jerks at two instances. One, it doesn't adequately or accurately engage with the framework of work and labour. It assumes the breadwinner/homemaker dichotomy of gender roles as a universal feature of human history that has only recently been challenged by women entering the workforce, rather than seeing it as an ideological justification of modern patriarchy. Not only is "going out to earn a living" a particular feature of modern capitalism, women's labour has through history been one of productive economic activity in addition to the critical economic activity of domestic work.

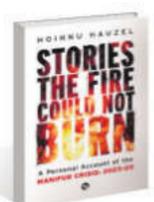
Two, despite adopting an intersectional framework, the book is silent about caste and does not draw on the extensive research on the fusion of caste and patriarchy in the Indian context.

The last section seeks to equip men not with theories, but an attitude with which they can learn to recognise and unlearn sexism. The key is empathy, a form of 'internal activism' that introspects and builds awareness. Further, it isn't enough to be aware and correct oneself, which is what a good person does, but to actively intervene to dismantle patriarchy. This clarion call to be a feminist made gently but firmly is a fitting conclusion for the book.  
— The reviewer teaches political science at Panjab University



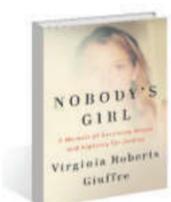
**FAITH AND FURY**  
by Jyoti Yadav.  
Westland.  
Pages 294. ₹599

Two months into the lockdown, journalist Jyoti Yadav set out to cover the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar and the migrant exodus unfolding across the country. She travelled on the highway and passing through small towns and villages, she documented the migrant crisis and the breakdown of India's healthcare infrastructure. She set out again when the far deadlier second wave struck. This book is a riveting chronicle of the unremitting tragedy that Covid was and the resilience that also sometimes accompanied it.



**STORIES THE FIRE COULD NOT BURN**  
by Hoihnu Hauzel.  
Speaking Tiger.  
Pages 232. ₹499

On May 3, 2023, decades of differences, aggravated by grievances over land and identity issues, between the Kuki-Zomi/Mizo tribes and the majority Meitei community in Manipur, spilled over resulting in deadly clashes. The author describes the night of terror when her parents' home in the tribal enclave in Imphal was burnt down. She recounts the ruthless beheading of David Thiek and the stripping of two women. This book is a portrait of love for one's homeland and the incredible pain of losing it forever.



**NOBODY'S GIRL: A MEMOIR OF SURVIVING ABUSE AND FIGHTING FOR JUSTICE**  
by Virginia Roberts Giuffre.  
Penguin Random House.  
Pages 367. ₹1,099

## REFLECTIONS

CHANDIGARH | 8 MARCH 2026

## Fighting against all odds



PRADEEP MAGAZINE

**B**ETWEEN possibility and reality, intent and action falls a shadow, of doubt, conditioning and even fear. In the long chain of human history and existence, there are as many things to celebrate as there are to regret. As I reflect on the meaning and significance of Women's Day, I realise how sportspersons like PT Usha, Mary Kom, Sakshi Malik, Vinesh Phogat and many others disrupted my "male gaze" that was "tutored" to see them in a particular way.

The four — Usha the super athlete, Mary Kom the legendary boxer, Sakshi Malik the Olympic medal winning wrestler and Vinesh Phogat, the face of resistance against exploitation in wrestling — have much in common. They have fought and succeeded against all odds in a system that is rigged against women, the vulnerable, poor and the minorities. And despite having achieved much, they are still struggling to find unconditional acceptance in a society that sees women more as a threat than equal partners in the workplace and the sporting arena.

Life is a learning experience, a journey that challenges one's perceived, fixed notions. The mirror on the wall may reflect the exact image of what is in front of it, but you choose to see what you want to. I, like millions of male youth of the country, was fed on Hindi cinema's image of a woman whose main vocation in life was to be loyal, selfless, even servile, and help their male counterparts succeed in life. They were fair, delicate, tender-hearted, helpless and needed a chivalrous male to rescue them from the "evil designs" of the world.

I joined the journalistic fraternity in 1979 where sports reporting was a male preserve. I had heard of how Kiran Peshawaria, who we know today as a former police officer-turned-politician Kiran Bedi, was an aspiring tennis player, known as much for her skill as for her short-tempered, angry outbursts on the courts. It was attributed to her being a "spoilt" woman with an "elite" upbringing.

The more living example for me was that of Kanwal Thakar Singh, the national badminton champion from Chandigarh, and her sister Kirron, partnering with whom she won the national doubles championship. Today we know Kirron Kher as a filmstar and a former Member of Parliament. Again, what was talked about more were their on-court tantrums that were seen as a reflection of their "privileged" background.

The year 1984 saw a more rooted athlete to Indian reality emerge on the horizon, PT Usha. The 'Payyoli Express' missed winning a bronze in the 400m hurdles event of the Olympics by a whisker and was to later win four gold medals in the 1986 Asian Games. Usha was the precursor



PT USHA

MARY KOM



SAKSHI MALIK

VINESH PHOGAT

**We need to sensitise ourselves to what it means to be a woman in a world seen through the male lens**

to breaking all the stereotypes that cinema and a patriarchal society had built for us. She was lean, dark, drenched in the soil of India's struggling working classes and didn't know how to speak in English, not even Hindi.

As the years rolled on and women in sports was now no longer a rare phenomenon and they even overtook men in their march to international glory, one image from 2012 is embedded in my mind. It was the year of the London Olympics, where women's boxing was to make its debut and the five-time world champion

Mary Kom had decided to make a comeback. At 29, she did not want to miss out on an Olympic medal. I tagged along for a trip to the National Institute of Sports (NIS), Patiala, with writer-novelist Rahul Bhattacharya, who had been assigned to do a full-length feature on her for an international magazine. Watching Mary's fragile, small frame unleash explosive energy through her piston-like arm movements in the training ring left me breathless. Rahul's perceptive, sensitive observations, guided by intuitive insights and lyrical prose — qualities that illuminate his portrayal of an indomitable woman in his acclaimed book 'Raisong' — appeared in the shape of an article later.

Mary, who went on to win a bronze in London, belongs to the Kom tribe from the poverty-ridden, violence-infested Manipur and her story is the very essence of what it means to be a woman in India and only those with iron will and a lot of luck can negotiate the unimaginable hazards strewn in the path that leads to the summit.

I marvel at Mary's achievements and feel disturbed at the present accounts of her bitter divorce and financial troubles. Her story in many ways echoes Sakshi Malik's story of success and disillusionment detailed in her memoir, 'Witness'. Sakshi records with feeling and restraint her hurt, body-shaming, fruitless protests against the wrestling federation president over sexual harassment in the book written with flair and deep understanding by Jonathan Selvaraj. To read it is to comprehend how difficult it is to be a woman and succeed, given the complexities and inherent gender biases of a society controlled by men.

Sakshi's story, much like Vinesh Phogat's, is that of courage, resilience, success against all odds and yet a sense of betrayal shadows their present lives. They feel like victims of a system that rewards obedience and punishes dissent.

Both gave up wrestling, announcing their quitting in anguish, frustration and tears. Vinesh had second thoughts and changed her mind. She believes she can still compete and win, seeking inspiration, perhaps, from all that she has achieved and endured. While we celebrate the glory they and many others have achieved and rejoice at India's triumph in cricket's World Cup last year, we need to sensitise ourselves to what it means to be a woman in a world seen through the male lens.

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

## Born of fire, she is the fire



RAAJA BHASIN

**O**F the many legends told to us, in their varied forms and voices, there is one of a time long gone.

Lost in the mists of myth and yet radiantly alive as belief, there was a time when the *asuras* declared war against the *devas*. The demons led by Mahisha were victorious against the gods, who lay vanquished. Trailing Indra, the despondent celestials went to Vishnu and spoke of their defeat. They lamented how their offices had been usurped, how demons now lorded over the heavens and of how all good people and sages were tormented and tortured. As their anguish and anger built, their brows knitted and *tejas*, pure energy, poured forth. This radiant energy swirled and illuminated the three worlds in a blaze of light. Then slowly this magnificence concentrated on a single spot and a huge flame burst forth. When the clouds of smoke dispersed, the gods saw that where the flames had just been, a young girl had come into being.

She was the first 'shakti' — Adi Shakti. In sight of the assembled gods, she was the primordial embodiment of female strength and power.

She was their creation; she was of them and yet not. The gods paid homage to this great force. They gave her attributes and gifts. From Shambhu came her mouth, from Yama's energy came her hair and from Vishnu, her arms. From the Moon were born her breasts, from Indra, her waist. From Varuna's power came her legs and from pure energy, her loins. Her feet came from Brahma, her toes from the Sun and her fingers and hands were given by the Vasus. Kubera gave her fine nostrils, Prajapati her teeth and from Agni came her three eyes.

From dawn and twilight came her eyebrows. Himavata gave her a white tiger to ride on, Kubera gave her a crown and other great wealth and Varuna gave her clothes and water. Vishvakarma gave the axe and impenetrable armour and the others gave her a garland of lotus flowers, a conch, and a host of other powerful symbols — like the discus and trident.

Attributed and armed, this force of good was sighted by the *asuras*, who attacked her in fury. Mahisha took on the guise of a fearsome buffalo and ravaged everything in sight. Other mighty *asuras* like Chikhsus, the ferocious Uda, and sword-hair Asiloma came with their armies. Great and terrible battles were fought till the demons were finally vanquished. Mahisha was felled when the Devi destroyed him by crushing him under her foot, piercing him with a spear and then finally beheading him.

She is worshipped in many forms. As 'Mahishasura Mardini', she is the slayer of the demon Mahisha. She is Durga. She is Mahamaya. She is Ambika.

One of her many forms is Kali,

where she is the first of the 10 Mahavidyas — the goddesses that give knowledge that may liberate us. In art, in depiction, in anthropomorphic forms, Kali may appear as a terrifying image that has a raw intensity and is ruthlessly fierce. The goddess, in her negative aspect, may appear as a collection of elements that lie past common comprehension. Her images or statues are often filled with symbols that refuse to be understood at first glance and serve as an example of the equivocal depiction of deities.

She is the symbol of the powerful cosmic power of eternal and unbreakable time, *Kala*. If she signifies annihilation through death or destruction, then, and only then, can creation — the seed of life — emerge. Simplistically, it is only with the destruction of the seed that a tree can take birth.

Within herself, Kali becomes the repository of creation, preservation and annihilation. Her complexion is the black of night that absorbs all colour; light and life; her hair; wild and uncombed, *elokeshi*, signifies the curtain of death that surrounds life with mystery that the living world cannot rip or tear. She wears a garland of human heads denoting the letters of the Sanskrit alphabet and this marks Kali as a repository of knowledge and learning and therefore, of might — and of the power of liberation.

Hands are the instruments of work and are what largely determine an individual's *karma* — what we achieve now

**Within herself, Kali becomes the repository of creation, preservation and annihilation**

in this life is what will carry us to the next and this is symbolised by the girle of human hands worn by her.

In her four hands, Kali holds the attributes of both destruction and creation. A severed head dangles by the hair from one hand and indicates destruction, while the other holds the bloodied sword of physical extermination that slices through the bondage equated with human life and the body — and the search for freedom that can only come from spiritual enlightenment. She also holds symbols of creation that dispel fear and summon spiritual strength. Her tongue, red and overwhelming, protrudes with the symbolism of absorbing negativity and the power of evil.

Choose what adjective you will: formidable, loving, tenacious and forgiving (or not). Choose what name you will. Choose what attribute she has in her formidable array of weaponry. She holds them all. To those who believe: She is All.

— *The writer is an author based in Shimla*

## Dalai Lama's warning on war as spectacle

**W**AR now enters our lives less as human testimony than as spectacle. It comes as looping video. We watch, we scroll, and gradually something dangerous happens. The eye remains engaged, but the moral imagination begins to tire.

The Dalai Lama's starting point is radically different. He begins with a truth so simple that politics constantly obscures it: every human being wants happiness, not suffering. The soldier does. The civilian does. The child under bombardment does. The leader authorising force does. Once that truth is forgotten, war becomes easier to discuss than to feel.

Violence is now often inflicted remotely, through systems of great precision and very little human encounter. One sees the flash of impact, but not the smell of concrete dust, the shock in the body, the silence of a home torn open, the mother unable to wake her child. The more technologically sophisticated war becomes, the easier it is to turn suffering into abstraction.

This is why the Dalai Lama's understanding of compassion matters. He does not mean sentiment or softness. He means disciplined attention: the effort to keep another's suffering pres-



ent in one's awareness when almost everything pushes us towards simplification, distraction or numbness. Today war reaches us first as spectacle, then as analysis, and quickly afterwards as economics. Human suffering arrives last.

The obscenity is not only moral but civilisational. Vast resources are poured into military systems while societies fail to provide hospital beds, schools and homes. The Dalai Lama has often pointed to this inversion of priorities. War deforms human intelligence by normalising the idea that organised destruction is a serious mark of political maturity.

The Dalai Lama has opposed violence consistently, yet acknowledged that life can confront us with terrible moral choices. The crucial point is that even when force is used, it should never

be morally sanitised. Necessary violence is still violence. It leaves a stain.

That moral seriousness is largely absent from the language of modern war. Every war is presented as necessary. Civilian deaths are mourned rhetorically and absorbed politically. Meanwhile, publics are asked to demonstrate loyalty by suspending deeper questions. Not only who is right, but what does war do to those who wage it? What forms of fear, censorship, tribalism and hardness does it leave behind?

For six decades, the Dalai Lama has led the Tibetan struggle without hatred. He has not recovered territory. He has done something rarer: preserving a people's moral centre while helping sustain their identity, institutions and hope. His phrase for this is "inner disarmament". It does not mean passivity. It means confronting the fear, hatred and vindictiveness from which violence continually draws new energy.

A civilisation is tested not only by how powerfully it can strike, but by whether it can remain human while force is being used in its name.

— *The writer is Managing Trustee of the Foundation for Universal Responsibility of The Dalai Lama. Views are personal*

## Women, mountains and a chemo ward

SONALI GUPTA

**T**HE first thing you notice in the 'day-care oncology unit' at IGMC is that it looks more like a modest dental clinic that has accidentally wandered into oncology. There are reclining dental chairs instead of luxe chemo recliners, IV poles that sway like deodars in a storm, and visitors who treat masks as optional accessories rather than mandatory gear. Between the antiseptic scent and the rustle of *shawls*, strangers become family, and this modest Himachal ward feels like a place where hope quietly drips into your veins with the chemo.

The women in this ward could each carry a novel. There is Neetu, the policewoman with cropped hair who takes her drip in uniform and worries more about pending files than white blood cell counts. And there is the daughter-in-law who quietly hides her mother-in-law's stage-4 diagnosis because she wants to gift her a few more months of unafraid days. Around them, attendants pass steel tiffins, IV poles creak theatrically, and the beeping machines perform a hesitant background score.

My own journey as a stage-3 cancer patient began far from Shimla in the City of Angels,

Los Angeles, where cancer centres resemble boutique hotels with attached coffee bars. I could have gone to Chandigarh or Delhi, of course, with their glossier reputations, but I wanted my oncology care in IGMC — close to the mountains that have held every other crisis of my life. In LA, chemo arrives on a platter; numbing sprays are offered before injections; there are latte menus and soft, coordinated blankets. Coming from that to IGMC feels like checking into a busy rural guesthouse. The linens may not match, but someone will always find you a pillow.

One day, my very serious sounding injection appeared in the chemo ward without its usual ice accompaniment. It was the kind of injection that looks as if it was designed for cooperative cattle rather than anxious humans. The young doctor on duty studied the syringe and then looked up at me and asked, "Do you know how to put this?" As a wrong kind of doctor, I could honestly say I knew where it went, but not how it should go in. So, we did what modern medicine and patients sometimes do together: watched a quick YouTube video, nodded gravely at the instructions, and shared a laugh that was half humor, more than half prayer.

She loaded the formidable syringe. "It'll pain a little," she warned gently, in the same

calm tone someone might use before saying, "Now, let's teach you how to cross the formidable Himalayas."

Not all pain here comes in syringes and drips. Getting treatment at a government hospital in the hills is an endurance sport. First, the token counter is up; the regular OPD is further up; the doctor's office is down; the chemo ward is in another building, also down; and the photocopy shop, naturally, is back up again. By lunchtime, you've done a *yatra*: administrative mountaineering with chemo side-effects.

Amrit Pharmacy — *amrit* meaning elixir — adds its own modest healing touch. In a world where bills can feel more dangerous than biopsies, it is oddly soothing to have a chemist who suggests the generic.

The ward is also a place of unexpected, intimate encounters. One afternoon, an old man in his chemo session became fascinated by

my broad Burberry spectacles. He gazed at them, finally asking me if he could try them on. I handed them over; he turned his head and searched for a reflection in the shiny surfaces around us. So, I flipped my phone to the camera and held it up. He peered at his reflection, and smiled at himself. For those few seconds, the chemo ward blurred out; we were just two people at an optician's shop, trying out frames. "Bohot badhiya lag raha hoon," he said. "Kahan se liye?" he asked. In that moment, the spectacles stopped being designer; they were simply borrowed vision, a tiny holiday from being a patient.

Threaded through all of this is the quiet efficiency of women like Ritu, who takes blood work with the concentration of a calligrapher. She gets it right in a single, gentle attempt. "Bas ek baar mein ho jayega, tension mat lo," she says. In a place where bruised arms and multiple pricks are routine, her careful hands feel like a daily miracle. If veins could choose favourites, mine would have adopted Ritu long ago.

At the centre of this improvisational orchestra stands Dr Manish Gupta, an oncologist whose quiet brilliance is matched by an unfussy empathy that makes hope strangely easy to hold. He explains options as if they are entirely manageable, and for a few min-

**Courage is not the absence of fear, but the decision to turn up**

# Win, lose, it's been an uplifting title defence

The depth in reserves has been the secret of India's success as it takes on New Zealand in the T20 World Cup final today

GAURAV KANTHWAL

WITH the ICC Champions Trophy (2025), ICC T20 World Cup (2024) and the ICC Women's World Cup 2025 (ODI) in the kitty, India's cup of cricketing joy is brimming like never before. Another T20 World Cup is just kissing distance away from stamping India's love affair with the most popular format of the game.

India is one step away from doing what has never been done before — successfully defend the World T20 title at home and become the only team to win the title three times (after 2007 and 2024) since its inception in 2007.

Even if the formidable New Zealand side thwarts India's dream sequence, the sun will keep shining on Indian cricket — despite stars like Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli fading away.

This team has an aura of invincibility around it: an enviable record of 42-8 in the T20Is in the last two years puts it head and shoulders above its contemporaries. Rival captains, former players, cricket pundits have all predicted the third title win for India.

## TOURNAMENT JOURNEY

It all began with Pakistan demanding to play in neutral venues and Bangladesh pulling out of the tournament, but three weeks into the T20 deep-dive, everything has been brushed under the carpet for the time being.

Riding on an unmatched 51-8 win-loss record in T20Is since October 2023, the Suryakumar Yadav-led Indian side was the team to beat. So sure of this was West Indies coach Darren Sammy that he said his team knew that if they had any ambition of winning the Cup, they would have to go through India at some point. The former World Cupper's belief was guided by India's record of winning all the nine bilateral T20I series in the run-up to the biennial event.

The World No.1 T20 team's campaign began with jitters and hurtled gingerly even as convincing wins eluded. Then came a shocker as India lost to South Africa by 76 runs in the group stage, their progress in the tournament dependent on two must-win games with an eye on the Net Run Rate.

That's when India drafted in opener Sanju Samson, who soon became the revelation of the tournament. By the time India were in the final, the Thiruvananthapuram-based batter was nominated as one of the eight players for the Player of



India is just one step away from successfully defending the World T20 title at home and become the only team to win the title three times, after 2007 and 2024. TRIBUNE PHOTO

the Tournament. The disappointment of World No.1 T20I batter Abhishek Sharma and No.1 T20I bowler Varun Chakravarthy failing to work up their charm was somewhat abated.

## WINNING COMBINATIONS

The secret of India's success among the top teams — New Zealand, South Africa and England — has been its depth in batting and bowling reserves. This meant that even if the top performers were having an off day, there was someone in his place to bail the team out from precarious positions. Shivam Dube, Hardik Pandya, and Axar Patel have played their part. India have done reasonably well by utilising different combinations and showing flexibility in the batting order.

Apart from being walloped by South Africa, India kept winning all the tactical battles against different teams throughout the tournament. In the semifinal, despite scoring 253/7 against a gun team like England, the hosts saw the match, and the World Cup, slipping away from



Sanju Samson



Finn Allen

their hands. Jasprit Bumrah's 18th over and Hardik Pandya's 19th over, in which they conceded 6 and 9 runs, took the game away from England.

The high stakes encounter recorded an unprecedented 65.2 million peak concurrent viewers on JioHotstar, setting a new world record for the highest concurrency ever achieved for a live event across any digital platform. The match had 619 million views, making it the most streamed T20 International match in history.

Cricket pundits had predicted India, South Africa, England and New Zealand/Pakistan as the semifinalists — and rightly so.

But what set the Indian team apart from the other strong favourites was the ability of its batters to counter off-spinners. The six left-hand batters in the team brought a bit of predictability and monotony, but right-handed Sanju Samson broke the shackles upfront with explosive starts in the Powerplays, and the momentum transferring seamlessly on to the lower middle-order.

Seamer Arshdeep Singh broke down the formula for India's success after the team's win against Zimbabwe: "As long as our batsmen are enjoying batting on that wicket, we are more than happy. Even if we go for runs, there's no problem, as long as they get that freedom from the wickets and can score runs freely, the bowlers are more than happy to do the dirty job."

Critics had debunked India's win in the Champions Trophy as a one-stop tourney with all the wins coming in Dubai. Here, in the ICC Men's T20 World Cup 2026, the Suryakumar Yadav-led side was the most travelled team in the tournament, straddling over 10,432 km through Mumbai, Delhi, Colombo, and Kolkata, by the end of the Super 8s to finally arrive at Ahmedabad for the World Cup final.

## ASSOCIATES SHOW METTLE

The gap between full-member nations and associate nations has reduced at least in T20 cricket. Each of the nine Associate Nations — Netherlands, USA, Italy, Oman, Nepal, Namibia, Scotland, Canada, and UAE — in the ICC Men's T20 World Cup 2026 had something to show. USA bowlers giving Indian batters a scare, Nepal giving England a run for their money in their tournament opener brought the novelty factor.

Pakistan's Sahibzada Farhan (383 runs) has till now scored the most runs in a single edition, breaking Virat Kohli's record. Canadian Yuvraj Samra scoring the highest runs (110) in an innings and USA pacer Shadley van Schalkwyk (13) being the highest wicket-taker in the tournament — till the semifinal stage — have been welcome departures from the heavyweights ruling the roost, but unfortunately, all the teams with these individual performers exited before the semifinals.

## THE KIWI SURPRISE

The 2021 T20 World Cup finalists New Zealand will play their sixth ICC final in 11 years. This time, they have plans to silence the crowd.

The Black Caps convincingly defeated South Africa, the unbeaten team in the tournament, by nine wickets in the semifinal as Finn Allen blasted the fastest-ever century of the tournament (100 not out in 33 balls).

The Mitchell Santner-led team carries on with its tradition of throwing up surprise matchwinners and finding ways to make it to the semifinals consistently.

Win or lose, both teams are worthy finalists. That same intensity is expected in Ahmedabad today evening.

## Empower women who put in more hours of hard work than spouses, yet are labelled as 'unemployed'

# Recognise economic value of a homemaker's labour

PUSHPA GIRIMAJI

WITH an estimated 200 million women working as homemakers, India's 'Homemaker Workforce' is truly large. But, unfortunately, their voice is not strong enough to be heard where it matters. Unlike salaried employees, they have no unions, no working hours, no holidays, no promotions and no payment for their toil.

Their work is grossly undervalued, and they are classified as 'unemployed' or 'outside the labour force'. They cook, clean, wash, manage the home, look after the young and old in the family, bear children, and in many cases, sacrifice their professional career for that of their spouse. Yet, sadly, there is hardly any recognition of the economic value of a homemaker's unpaid labour.

All this is also reflected in the justice system. Be it a case of compensation in a consumer complaint, a motor vehicle accident claim, or for that matter a matrimonial dispute, homemakers have been getting a raw deal, with tribunals putting a low value on their contribution to work, economy, lives and on their suffering.

In consumer jurisprudence, for example, in cases of medical negligence, fire accidents, boat tragedies or unsafe products, the compensation for death, injury, pain and suffering often becomes modest or even meagre, if the victim is a homemaker. The explanation in all such cases is that the victim is 'only a housewife' or that she is 'not gainfully employed' or is 'unemployed'. In fact, the pain and suffering of a victim are often undervalued if that person happens to be a homemaker.

For several years now, an enlightened higher judiciary has been reprimanding the lower courts for their lack of recognition of the value of homework, and even enhancing the compensation given by the lower

courts, but unfortunately, the message has not permeated through all levels of the justice system, particularly the tribunals.

*Jaswinder Singh vs Santokh Nursing Home* case, for example, pertains to the tragic death of a woman due to medical negligence. The Chandigarh Consumer Commission awarded a compensation of Rs 14.5 lakh, which was not a big amount. But the National Consumer Disputes Redressal Commission reduced even this meagre amount to Rs 8 lakh. The reason for the drastic cut was that the deceased woman was only a housewife and was not generating income through any occupation!

While restoring the amount awarded by the State Commission, the Supreme Court observed that the National Commission had committed a serious error: "The mere fact that the deceased was a homemaker was not sufficient to deny adequate compensation to the appellants in lieu of the services rendered by her," said the Supreme Court (January 16, 2012).

Prior to this, in *Arun Kumar Agrawal vs National Insurance Company* case (July 22, 2010), the Supreme Court chastised the high court as well as the Motor Accident Claims Tribunal (MACT) for awarding low compensation for the death of a woman, on the ground that she was a non-earning member of the family. While doing so, Justice Asok Kumar Ganguly, in a supplementary judgment, regretted that "despite the clear constitutional mandate to eschew discrimination on grounds of sex in Article 15(1) of the Constitution, there was a distinct gender bias against women in various social welfare legislations as well as judicial pronouncements. The Parliament should properly assess the value of homemakers' work and suitably amend the provisions of the Motor Vehicles Act, matrimonial and other laws to give effect to Article 15(1) of the Constitution".

More recently, in *Arvind Kumar Pandey vs Girish Pandey* case, the apex court was



In a recent case about maintenance, the Delhi HC said it is a misunderstanding that a non-earning spouse is 'idle' with no domestic contribution. Managing a household, childcare, looking after the family, etc, are all forms of work, even though housewives are unpaid and unacknowledged. ISTOCK

again critical of the MACT and the high court for the low compensation awarded on the ground that the deceased woman was a homemaker (February 16, 2024).

In many judgments, the courts have also pointed to the absence of statutory provisions valuing homemaking as an economic activity and called upon Parliament to take necessary steps in this regard. In *Mania Ghai vs Nishant Chander* case (September 11, 2025), where the wife had claimed an equal share in the property that the husband had bought while they were married, the Delhi High Court observed: "One must not forget that in a vast multitude of households in

this country, especially in those households where there is no assistance in terms of domestic help, etc, the presence of a full-time homemaker permits the family to discount various other expenses that would have to be borne towards the maintenance of the home and family, permitting, in appropriate cases, the availability of a larger corpus by accretion on a regular basis as well as facilitating households to generate a certain amount of disposable income deployable on a gainful basis, including in the purchase of a residential property."

"...However, we take note of the fact that currently, there exists no statutory basis

accounting for the recognition of such contributions of homemakers for the purpose of making any determination on the ownership rights or even to quantify the value of these contributions," the court said.

One of the strongest defences of homemakers came from the Delhi High Court last month in a marital case pertaining to maintenance. "The assumption that a non-earning spouse is 'idle' reflects a misunderstanding of domestic contribution. Managing a household, caring for children, supporting the family, and adjusting one's life around the career and transfers of the earning spouse are all forms of work, even though they are unpaid and often unacknowledged. To describe non-employment as idleness is easy; to recognise the labour involved in sustaining a household is far more difficult. These responsibilities do not appear in bank statements or generate taxable income, yet they form the invisible structure on which many families function," the court said.

"Where one spouse earns income in the marketplace and the other sustains the domestic sphere, the economic stability of the household is the result of combined, though differently manifested, contributions. A homemaker does not 'sit idle'; she performs labour that enables the earning spouse to function effectively. To disregard this contribution while adjudicating claims of maintenance would be unrealistic and unjust," the court said (*Rakesh Ray vs Priti Ray* case, February 16, 2026).

As we celebrate International Women's Day today, the 715-million strong female population should demand statutory recognition of the economic value of the homemakers' labour. That would go a long way in empowering millions of women who put in more hours of hard work than their spouses, yet are labelled as being 'unemployed' or 'not gainfully employed'.

— The writer is a consumer affairs expert



## REFLECTIONS

## THE BIG PICTURE

## In West Asia, a widening conflict with no clear ends

The US and Israel's war on Iran has unleashed powerful centrifugal pressures far beyond just geo-economic supply-side shocks. These threaten a fragile calm in the Indian subcontinent

The US' secretary of war, Pete Hegseth, did not hesitate in stating that America and Israel will sow "death and destruction from the sky, all day long", in Iran. Over the last week, since the start of this illegal war driven by hubris, Hegseth has kept his word and more. Enabled in secrecy by American and Israeli intelligence agencies, Iranian-Kurdish militias have launched a ground incursion in north-west Iran, and the Islamic regime's stockpile of missiles has shrunk dramatically.

From a military operational perspective, the US-Israeli attack is a success. From a political strategic vantage, it is heading towards abject failure. Though weakened, the Iranian regime is far from imminent collapse. If Hamas could withstand Israeli bombing and ground operations for two years in the small, isolated Gaza strip, the Iranian regime has a lot more bandwidth to manoeuvre and resist. But it is also true that an ethnic, sectarian civil war is likely to balkanise Iran.

Iran's destruction will be a strategic shock to the Indian subcontinent.

Not because this war is hindering maritime trade flows, disrupting oil and gas supplies, risking Indian lives in the Gulf, and triggering protests by Shia communities

across South and West Asia. Nor necessarily because the theatre of operations has expanded into the wider Indian Ocean region since the downing of the Iranian frigate IRIS Dena just off Sri Lanka. All these aspects are true and troubling; this is already a global conflict with no clear ends.

There is a more proximate cause for concern for New Delhi, though: The segues between an Iranian civil war and the "open war" between Afghanistan and Pakistan. This is the worst inter-State fighting the two sides have experienced since 1960-61; Afghanistan lost that bout to Pakistan, which effectively used airstrikes to trigger the political ouster of then Afghan prime minister (PM) Daud Khan.

From clashes in the borderlands, Kabul's sponsorship of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan and Baloch militants, coupled with cross-border drone probes, to unimpeded Pakistani airstrikes across Afghanistan, the "open war" has clarified two aspects. One, the Afghan Taliban's prowess as an insurgent movement has not translated into conventional power. Its inheritance of high-grade American equipment cannot fill Kabul's deficit in airpower and air defence. In an inter-State war with Pakistan, Kabul doesn't even have the luxury of time, and the muscular rhetoric of Afghan resilience is struggling in the face of unceasing aerial bombardment.

This is creating contradictory pressures in Afghanistan. There is a rallying around the flag effect that has reduced the salience of strain between the Sirajuddin Haqqani-led faction in Kabul and the followers of Kandahar-based supreme leader Haibatullah Akhundzada. But it has started to dawn in both these camps that Afghanistan is

woefully isolated, that Pakistan has no reason to stop the bombing, and that there are no third-party interlocutors in the Gulf available to seriously negotiate a ceasefire. To top it all, Afghanistan's trade networks through Iran and links with the Tehran regime lay asunder.

The Afghans are, in effect, fighting the only neighbour their economy depends on — this is unsustainable. Whether Pakistan goes for leadership decapitation and regime change in Kabul or restricts its aims to degrading the Taliban's capabilities, desperation is about to mount in Afghanistan. The most damage Kabul can inflict on Pakistan is to let the TTP execute mass casualty attacks. Far from deterring Islamabad, such attacks will escalate this "open war".

From this perspective, Iran's devastation could not be more ill-

timed for the Afghan Taliban and be a blessing in disguise for Pakistan. Several thousand Afghan fighters belonging to the previous Islamic Republic took shelter in Iran after 2021. Sooner than later, these fighters and their leaders will seek to return home to relative safety. Pakistan has already been engaging with the National Resistance Front and other anti-Taliban outfits in and around Afghanistan. If it sees an opportunity to fund and arm these Iran-based Afghan exiles, there is a risk of the Afghan civil war re-erupting. Even if the Taliban regime does not collapse, for Pakistan, chaos in Kabul is preferable to a united Afghan Taliban that shelters anti-Pakistan outfits.

Internal conflict in Afghanistan and civil war in Iran will put Pakistan back in the driver's seat as a frontline partner of the US. When seen from this vantage, Pakistani PM



In an inter-State war with Pakistan, Kabul doesn't even have the luxury of time, and the muscular rhetoric of Afghan resilience is struggling in the face of unceasing aerial bombardment.

REUTERS

Shehbaz Sharif's cringeworthy praise for the American president and Field Marshal Asim Munir's growing assertiveness start to make strategic sense. It also brings us to the material and psychological calculus at play in Islamabad. There has long been an argument that if Pakistan is busy fighting fires on its western front, it is likely to focus less on its eastern front. Given the evolving character of "non-contact" warfare between India and Pakistan, as witnessed last May, such territorial logic does not hold as much ground today as it did in the past.

Moreover, accurately or not, Pakistan's armed forces are a lot more confident about their capabilities in relation to India than they were before Operation Sindoor. Far from being humbled by Pakistan's crises, Munir has become emboldened by them. The psychological impact of supposedly "winning" several battles since he took

charge is a lot more potent than Munir's apparent pique has ever been. It is his continual tactical successes, more than the strength of his Islam, that makes Munir dangerous and prone to overplaying his hand.

The US and Israel's war on Iran has unleashed powerful centrifugal pressures far beyond just geo-economic supply-side shocks. India and Pakistan are perilously close to another bout of fighting, and the next round of conflict is unlikely to stop in 88 hours. China's siding with Pakistan, India's domestic political realities, Munir's overconfidence while blaming India for all of Pakistan's troubles, and Iran's unprecedented destruction risks rocking the subcontinent's fragile calm. Whether State sanctioned or not, all it will take is one successful terrorist attack on Indian soil for such escalation to occur.

India may think that it has chosen a "side" in the US-Israeli war on Iran, but it must be under no illusion that this "side" has not yet chosen India. Beyond playing peacemaker, the US is unlikely to come to India's defence given Pakistan's growing value for the White House in the context of the Iran war, and Munir's expectations on Afghanistan in return. Neither will Israel or the Gulf States intervene to India's satisfaction. New Delhi is arming for war, but it also needs to plan for peace. For this, it needs to urgently put in place guardrails with Pakistan to ensure that the next round of conflict — a question of when, not if — does not spark a wider Asian war.

Avinash Paliwal teaches at SOAS, University of London and is the author of *India's Near East: A New History*. The views expressed are personal

## SUNDAY SENTIMENTS

Karan Thapar



## Fallacy of parental consent in marriage

Do adult Indians have the right to marry whoever they want without parental permission? That may sound like a rhetorical question, but it could soon become a legal issue. Of course, under our Constitution and our present laws, girls over 18 and boys over 21 can marry whoever they want, regardless of region, religion and caste. Article 21 has been interpreted to guarantee this. Sadly, that doesn't include gender, though they can live with someone of their own sex.

As recently as 2021, the Supreme Court in the *Laxmibai Chandaragi B* case ruled that "the consent of the family or the community or the clan is not necessary once the two adult individuals agree to enter into a wedlock and that their consent has to be piously given primacy".

The government of Gujarat, however, seems to disagree. The deputy chief minister (CM), Harsh Sanghavi, has proposed amendments to the Gujarat Registration

of Marriages Act 2006, which, as newspapers have summarised, make "consent of parents compulsory for registration of a marriage." One can assume that what Sanghavi said in the assembly makes clear his real concern. "Under the name of love jihad, a game is being played in the state. If any Salim changes his identity and becomes Suresh to trap innocent girls, he will be taught a lesson for life... this government is the protector of every daughter's dignity and of our *sanatan* tradition."

You won't be wrong if you conclude that the idea is to stop Muslim boys from marrying Hindu girls. The deputy CM couldn't have been more blunt. And the process the proposed amendment lays out is clearly intended to deter, not facilitate.

For a start, the marriage registration application has to be submitted with the signatures of both parties as well as two witnesses. It must be legally notarised,

and it must be accompanied by proof of identity of both the boy and the girl, issued by the central government or the state government, such as a driving licence, passport or photo identity card. But that's not all. The application also has to enclose what newspapers call "the details of documents of the bride and groom, including aadhaar card, birth certificate or school leaving certificates, wedding invitation, two passport size photographs as well as photographs of the witnesses and a formal declaration that the bride and groom have informed their parents." Some newspapers claim "similar documents of parents on both sides will be required".

Frankly, this is intolerable, indefensible and unconscionable. The state government believes, as this newspaper reported, that this is required "to protect women, prevent fraud and restore transparency... particularly in love marriages and elopements."

How different things were when Nisha and I got married in 1982. She was Catholic. I was Hindu. She wanted a church wedding, and Father Terry Gilfedder was happy to arrange a full religious service with communion despite the fact that I wasn't a Catholic. He didn't ask for witnesses. He didn't care whether our parents had granted permission. He didn't require notarised declarations of our identity.

Father Terry was more concerned about the love that had brought us together. "I love you are three words that

## UNDER OUR CONSTITUTION AND OUR PRESENT LAWS, GIRLS OVER 18 AND BOYS OVER 21 CAN MARRY WHOEVER THEY WANT, REGARDLESS OF REGION, RELIGION AND CASTE

symbolise today", he said in his sermon, after he'd declared us man and wife. "But remember, love not only joins the words I and you, it also separates them." His advice was simple. Remember you're two individuals, with your own tastes and preferences, and love will grow. Forget, and it could suffer.

I wonder what Father Terry would make of the Gujarat government's proposed amendments? "Oh dear", is what I think he'd say. "Forgive me, dear Lord for they know not what they do." I trust our courts will be less accommodating.

Isn't it strange that in the second quarter of the 21st century, with AI knocking on our doors and Viksit Bharat two decades away, our governments should be obsessed with determining whether an adult boy and girl can marry who they want without Mummy and Daddy's permission? But then, this is India.

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

## ENGENDER

Lalita Panicker



## War brings more pain, hurt to women in Iran

The war unleashed by Israel and the US against Iran can only mean more suffering and pain than already exists for the country's women in the near future. Iranian-Canadian human rights activist, Nazanin Afshin-Jam Mackay, speaking on CTV, says that the death of Ayatollah Khamenei signals the end of the Supreme Oppressor, not the Supreme Leader. Women are not shedding tears for him. However, she is concerned that those who might be put in place — and at this moment, it is his son Mojtaba Khamenei — could be no different from the earlier ones and that the US might choose "stability" over real change.

Irrespective of the legality or necessity of this war, the late Ayatollah's regime had an appalling record when it came to women's rights. During the last protest by women, many women were killed, maimed and imprisoned, and there is little record of this in official Iranian statistics. The digital blackout to contain the protest led to thousands of women who, thanks to intense gender discrimination, were pushed out of the formal job market also being shut out from their online jobs. Ever since the Revolution of 1979, Iran's women have had a very raw deal. They have been consistently invisibilised and rendered economically dependent on male relatives.

On the rare occasion women have protested, the State framed the protests as being anti-Islam when, in reality, this had little to do with religion. But this enabled a regressive State to use this as a weapon of surveillance and punishment to deprive women of their agency. Women simply demanding their rights have always been framed as confrontational, inviting further repression. Yet, despite all the violence, women have repeatedly tried to create their own space, often at their own peril.

If this war does bring about regime change, it is highly unlikely that women will be in a better place. Their rights are not likely to be on top of the agenda of either the US or Israel.

UN Women, concerned that the now-expanded conflict is placing women and girls at immediate risk, says, "Women and girls everywhere have the right to live in safety and in peace, free from violence and discrimination. Escalating hostilities disrupt essential services, increase the risk of gender-based violence, and further constrain and endanger women-led organizations and first responders."

After the 1979 Revolution, women were forced to retreat behind the veil, and men were given greater powers in inheritance laws. Under the guise of protecting women, the State stepped up surveillance and the marriage age was lowered to nine years. It is now 13 years, which still amounts to child abuse. Women cannot go abroad without a male chaperone: the evidence of one man is equal to that of two women in a court of law, and any failure to adhere to strict clothing rules invites a beating at the hands of the moral police.

Anita Anand, a development and communication specialist who has worked for years in Afghanistan, says, "While women and civil society have cause for celebration after Khamenei's elimination, the political, social and economic system has to change as well. In a slightly parallel situation, when the US and international forces attacked Afghanistan after 9/11, the country saw enormous freedom and growth for Afghan women and the blossoming of civil society. But that all changed overnight when the Taliban returned in 2021. We can only be cautiously optimistic about Iran's future and that of its women."

The views expressed are personal

## Have your Men's Day, but we'll have the rest

It is a truth universally acknowledged that men and women, once they acquire a fortune of revisionist education, which is nothing but gibberish, must voice their demand for a Men's Day. Perhaps all year long, but especially on International Women's Day. This is how the logic of symmetric signalling works: Every symbolic acknowledgement must have a mirror image.

No matter whether a Men's Day actually exists (November 19; yes, run with it). No matter whether even a Women's Day achieves precious little to bring equality to the second sex. The issue is not the absence of recognition; it is the presence of someone else's recognition.

"Man represents both the positive and the neutral," observed Simone de Beauvoir, identifying Woman, in this symbolic order, as "the Other." Trying to correct the historical, religious, and socio-political attitude and reality that ensures Man as the baseline clearly needs more than symbolic days. The citizen, the worker, the intellectual, the soldier — all these archetypes and more were implicitly male. But men must have their day, too. They cannot bear even a day of not being in the spotlight, however performative that spotlight may be.

Writer Sara Ahmed talks about the politics of complaint through her book on complaints of sexual harassment, bullying, and racial abuse, et cetera. Whenever mar-

ginalised groups complain about inequality, the focus frequently shifts away from the inequality itself and toward the supposed excess of the complaint, and the rare eventual punishment. The complainant becomes the problem.

The what-about-men question operates as a discursive strategy to unseat women, even from the position of receiving the crumbs. This framing fails to achieve anything for men, except social media relevance for a few hours. It's a fascinating study of men's behaviour. Yet another glimpse into the psychology of privilege. The meltdown when they become aware, however briefly, that they might not be the centre of every narrative.

Maybe women should gift this day, which has anyway come far from the celebration of the suffragette movement and equal gender rights to offering discounts (with the mandatory fine print) on pink tax-ed products, to the protesting men. Maybe then men will, yet again, feel like men. Because 364 days aren't enough for them, and this one day robs them of essential masculinity, which, by the way, is good for women.

Masculinity has saturated the cultural and institutional fields. Men are tired. They are barely keeping it together while women continue to knock at the door. Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown. Men are struggling to be men when being



Masculinity has saturated the cultural and institutional fields. Men are tired. They are barely keeping it together while women continue to knock at the door. HT ARCHIVE

men is questioned. They need a rest. Perhaps even to reflect on how they are "feeling" within and about their bodies. Science is also unfriendly. Men are also discovered to have post-partum depression now. Who'd have thought!

The crisis of masculinity, a political mobilisation war cry, is real, we are told. So, why are men not taking a break? They really need to get off the treadmill. They perhaps need a spa day, too. Will they, then, begin to understand that they have a high, very high, concentration of nerve endings in their fingertips, too? Or that patriarchal systems are tying them up in the endless rebellion-resistance cycle? These are essential lessons for men in both the sheets and the streets.

The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu argued that societies distribute not only economic resources but also symbolic cap-

ital in terms of recognition, prestige, and legitimacy. Symbolic attention, in this view, functions like a scarce commodity. If women receive it today, men must necessarily be losing it. Hence, "I'll have what she is having" with the familiar twist.

Let men have it. But, then, let women have the crown, the nuclear codes, market control, reproductive rights, street superiority, obscenely higher wages, clubs and cliques, under-the-table deals, negotiation rooms, director's chairs, music guild halls, art gallery dominance, staggering book deals, unlimited supply of the benefit of doubt, and, above all, a victimhood that never ages.

Shall we do the swap? Happy, yet another, Men's Day!

Nishtha Gautam is an academician and author. The views expressed are personal

## SUNDAY LETTERS

## Law and privilege

This is with reference to "The prince and the police: A British tale" by Karan Thapar (March 01). The arrest of Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor suggests in Britain, the law is above privilege. King Charles's assertion that the law must take its course was also striking. Equality before law is essential for democracy to retain credibility.

Sanjay Chopra

## The case for digital restraint

This is with reference to "Why a social media ban is starting to make sense" by Namita Bhandare (March 01). The proposed under-16 social media ban is a long-awaited step. When children are freed from screens, their energies should be channelled into sports, reading, writing, and in-person friendships.

P V Prakash

II Social media has completely clouded the thinking and working abilities of children. This has a negative impact on their growth. Society must have a broad conversation on restricting access to social media for children.

Soni Agarwal

Write to us at: [letters@hindustantimes.com](mailto:letters@hindustantimes.com)

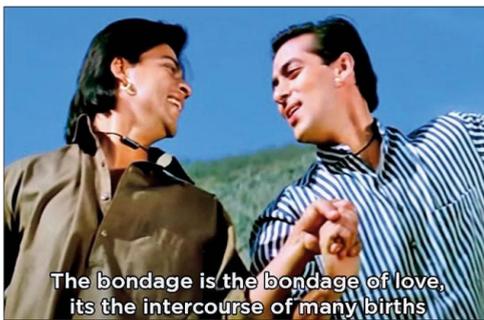
## 'Do Not Disturb, Tiny Grass is Dreaming' – Eat Your Heart Out, Mr Wordsworth

Translators of the world, unite against AI tech machinations – you have everything to lose when humans are bypassed and lingual bridges are burnt to be replaced by duolingo hilarity



**JUG SURAIYA**  
In 2012, I was visiting Xi'an in central China where the famous Terracotta Warriors of the Qing Dynasty (221-206 BCE) are encamped. I found the warriors fascinating, and the guest notice regarding the rules of Golden Flower hotel, where I was staying, equally fascinating. 'If you are stolen, call the police at once!' exhorted the notice, and warned that 'Dying right here is prohibited'. An injunction to avoid walking on the lawn assumed a lyricism worthy of Wordsworth, 'Do Not Disturb - Tiny Grass is Dreaming'.

I recalled these and other delightful diversions of 'duolingualism' on reading a recent report that has created a storm in the literary salons of Paris, occasioned by a French publisher of romantic fiction, such as Passion pour un Inconnu (Passion for a Stranger), who is in talks with an AI company to make translations cheaper and faster than by employing humans. The 27-nation EU, with its 24 official languages, is a hub of textual translation and oral interpretation, which provides employment to thousands of people. Professional groups have reacted by calling the proposal to bypass human resources in building lingual bridges 'unacceptable' and 'outrageous'. Indeed, a 2024 British Society of Authors (SoA) survey has noted that more than one-third of the country's translators



**SUBPAR SUBTITLE, YOU THINK?**  
have been pink-slipped, thanks to AI. According to the report, 'All point a finger to the indiscriminate use of language technology, in particular AI, to cut costs and replace or minimise human translation work.' Industry watchers claim that computer-

generated movie subtitles have greatly improved the accuracy of rendition by replacing human translators. As the founder of a German AI company prophesies, 'The change will be profound.' However, despite Sartre's grumpy assertion that there are no good translators, only dandies who write like butchers, and butchers who dip their pens in eau de cologne, with AI taking over the translation business, what's gained on the swings of sense might be lost on the roundabout of risibility. If proof be needed that two Wongs can make a write, a Chinese ad for an American brand of fried chicken whose slogan is 'It's finger lickin' good' rendered that zestful inducement to a cannibalistic

command of 'Eat your fingers'—which gives a new meaning to 'finger foods'. Sounding a funeral note, another Chinese ad for an American cola, which urged consumers to 'Come alive with the Pepsi generation', in a literally high-spirited translation interpreted this to mean that the beverage 'brings your ancestors back from the grave.' A Spanish promo for an American beer that enjoined customers to 'Turn it loose' gave would-be buyers runs for their money by assuring them that they would 'Get diarrhoea.' Presidents, no less than publicists, are subject to vagaries of vicarious verbalisation as Jimmy Carter discovered during a 1977 goodwill tour of Poland. In the course of a public address, his American interpreter transformed POTUS' eagerness to 'understand your desires for the future' to 'I desire the Poles carnally,' pro-

viding an example of one's words unwittingly being lost in translation. If topsy-turvy translation is accorded a Hall of Fame, pride of place in it must be given to Pedro Carolino who, for reasons known only to himself, embarked on a project to compile an English phrasebook, English As She Is Spoke, for Portuguese readers, undeterred by the minor obstacle of his being almost totally ignorant of the Anglo-Saxon tongue. The work, published in 1855, became an international best-seller. In his introduction to the 1883 American edition, Mark Twain saluted it by saying, 'Nobody can add to the absurdity of this book, nobody can imitate it successfully, nobody can hope to produce its fellow; it is perfect.' A section titled 'Idiotisms and Proverbs' contains helpful homilies such as 'Take out the live coals with the hand of the cat', 'The stone as roll not heap up not foam', 'There is not better sally than who the appetite', and the utterly inimitable and impenetrable, 'To crunch a marmoset'. No LOL, please. It might wake the tiny grass from its dreaming.

### WORD COUNTS



## When Tushar Arrived on an Olympic Scale

A view from the tropics of the snowy edition of the Games we tend to miss out

In case you noticed, the Winter Olympics in Italy came to an end on February 22. Tropical contribution, and attention, to the Games was minimal. As in any mega sporting event, some athletes cemented their status as champions, some did not fulfill the pre-Olympic hype (US figure skater Ilia Malinin and US alpine ski racer Lindsey Vonn, for example), and some outperformed as newcomers. Then there was 'viral' news unrelated to results: a Norwegian biathlete skier's post-race confession about cheating on his girlfriend; Canadian cunning in the normally calm sport of curling – both the men's and women's teams were reportedly involved in the 'inappropriate touching' of the granite curling stone. As the names suggest, Summer and Winter Olympics are as different as sun and snow, the first obvious difference being the lack of diversity in the Winter Games. They're dominated by European and North American countries, Japan, South Korea, and China make for an Asian presence. India first competed in the Winter Olympics in 1964, and has had a continuous presence since 1998, typically with 1-2 participants.

One difference I didn't expect was the explicit objective of the downhill ski race, one of the games' main attractions. The rulebook of the organising body FIS (International Ski and Snowboard Federation), states, 'A downhill is characterised by the six components of technique, courage, speed, risk, physical condition and judgement.' This sport is probably the only one to enshrine such a 'test' formally in the rules. And this stated focus on testing courage and risk makes the downhill race thrilling to watch.

The gradients in parts of the downhill run approach a slope of 35-40°. (A typical home staircase has a 30° slope, which doesn't look daunting for everyday use, but for a ski-run is very steep.) Such steepness ensures that speeds of up to 130 kmph are routinely achieved.

Then, there are the event names. Sure, the Summer Games feature events like dressage in equestrian sports; skeet and trap in shooting; and coxless and sculls in rowing. Still, most events such as swimming, diving, boxing, track and field, wrestling sound like activities many can engage in. Even gymnastics has a familiar feel to it.

Out of the 16 sports (each sport has multiple events) in the 2026 Winter Olympics, 10 have the word 'ski', 'skate', 'snowboard', or 'hockey' in their name. Luge, skeleton, and Nordic combined are some that form the other six. There's also curling. It could mean anything from a hairstyle to a gym exercise. As a Winter Olympic sport, it's an activity of sliding big granite disks over a long patch of ice with the goal of stopping them inside a target circle. It's surprisingly quite captivating.

At first glance, Winter Olympics events appear to be more risky as compared to those in the Summer Games (as Lindsey Vonn's crash in the women's downhill ski race would suggest). An analysis of injuries in the Summer and Winter Games, however, doesn't bear out that assumption.

A 2013 article in the British Journal of Sports Medicine, 'Sports Injuries at the Olympics: A Review of Incidence Related Data from Past Games and the Implications for Future Multi-Sport Events' concluded that the rate of injuries is about 10% (percent of total athletes suffering an injury) in the prior edition of each Games. Snowboard cross – a downhill race – led the count in the Winter Games, and football (knee injuries) in the Summer variety.

A possible way to reconcile this data with the presumption of Winter Olympics being more injury-prone is that the time spent actively engaging in the event is far less for the Winter events. For example, skiers and boarders complete one run in about 2 minutes, and compete 2-4 times. So, the total time 'on course' can be a maximum of 10 minutes, whereas in the Summer Games, athletes participate for a much longer time.

Despite the demographic homogeneity, the Winter Olympics are exciting to watch for anyone, irrespective of their own demographics. They are fast and edgy, many outcomes being photo-finishes. And they showcase this novel dimension of humans, a trait not limited only to sporting prowess – to steer over slippery surfaces.

The writer is MD, Resonance Laboratories, Bengaluru

## HERE'S A DIFFERENT KIND OF ANTI-HERO

A film by someone who simply watched and listened to life going on before her camera, gathering sweetness & wisdom along the way



**ANNA MM VETTICAD**  
At a time when aggressive masculinist notions of heroism rule mainstream Indian cinema, Rima Das' choice of title for her latest film, Not A Hero, is a statement. Das, a leading light on the country's indie circuit, just received a Crystal Bear Special Mention for this new venture at the Berlin International Film Festival. Premieres and wins on prestigious platforms have become second nature for this remarkable Assamese filmmaker since her feature debut a decade back.

As with all Das' best-known works, Not A Hero's protagonist is a child. Mivaan is a city-bred 11-year-old who is forced to shift temporarily to his ancestral village where he must live with his father's estranged sister. In Das' trademark style, this high drama rolls out on screen in an undramatised fashion, complemented by Aditya Varma's exquisite cinematography, and Pallab Talukdar's soothing music.

Expectedly, the initial friction between Mivaan and his aunt Pahi gives way to acceptance, and his boredom with the village turns into involvement. The bursts of energy in this otherwise meditative narrative bear

Das' signature, which is heavily influenced by Satyajit Ray's Apu Trilogy. In these aspects of its scripting and direction, Not A Hero does not throw up surprises. Its contribution to coming-of-age stories featuring a young person's urban-to-rural sojourn lies in the almost activist-like solidarity among the children. The stand-out elements are an episode in which these incredible kids grasp the finer nuances of sexual abuse, and towards the end, an endearing life lesson on loving and letting go. At first, Mivaan is buried in his cellphone, and we, as viewers, get to see and hear the beautiful Assamese countryside that he's missing. Slowly, he looks up, notices, absorbs. The warmth in school, alongside horrendous bullying by one boy and violence in the home of another, all draw him out incremental-

ly, awakening him, among other things, to his socio-economic and familial privilege in contrast with his schoolmates' challenging circumstances.

Mivaan's evolving equation with these children, his friendship with a boy called Rio and a delicate beast, emerge as the film's dominant strand. The progression in his relationship with Pahi (played by a striking Sukanya Boruah) is not written with the same depth. Minimalist writing works in some respects in Not A Hero. For instance, the film loses nothing by not detailing the financial compulsion that led to Mivaan being sent to the village (we don't need to know), or by not delving into the parents' gendered relationship (we get it). But Pahi's insubstantial characterisation and storyline, and the handling

of Mivaan's friendship with a girl in school occasionally gives the film a flimsy feel.

Das is skilled in extracting stellar performances from children, as we know especially from the multiple award-winning 2017 film Village Rockstars and its 2024 sequel Village Rockstars 2. Not A Hero's children, led by Bhuvan Bhargav Das as Mivaan, are delightful. Bhuvan is the director's nephew. She has said that the film emerged from her observations of him in their village in Assam, a setting to which she has repeatedly returned in her filmography. He is adorable, but not distractingly so, in a role that has him balancing child-like innocence and extraordinary maturity.

At one point, when Rio (Mrinmoy Das) declares that city children are scared of everything, Mivaan replies, 'I'm not scared, I just know the danger.' Bhuvan is that rare child who can pull off such a line, yet not come off as precocious.

Not A Hero is an India-Singapore co-production, blending Assamese with Hindi and English. Das is the film's Indian producer, in addition to its director, writer and editor. Multi-tasking is a hallmark of her oeuvre, and one reason why she is so prolific, despite independent cinema's many struggles in India.

Not A Hero does not have lofty ambitions. It's been made by a filmmaker who simply watched and listened to life going on before her camera, gathering sweetness and wisdom along the way.

When you become all ears

## Start a War, Or Not, To Stop It From Starting

Is Trump's fight on Netanyahu's behalf a response to a battle lost 3,483 years ago?



**INDRAJIT HAZRA**  
Now let's try and understand this very carefully. Donald Trump has gone on record to say that he didn't start Netanyahu's war against Iran. He has also gone on record to say that he did start a war – to stop a war before it could start. In effect, we are officially witnessing a Schrödinger's war, named after Erwin Schrödinger's famous 1935 quantum mechanics thought-experiment involving a cat that is alive and dead at the same time, illustrating the absurdity of quantum superposition – existing in multiple states – on macroscopic objects.

Let's consider the first explanation: that the Israel-US combine did not start the war. Well, technically the first shot was probably not even fired by the Persians, but by Egyptians at the Battle of Megiddo in 1457 BCE when Pharaoh Thutmose III – no relation to US secretary of war Pete Hegseth I – went full-expansionist mode in

the Levant. It could well be that Netanyahu convinced Trump that the loss of Megiddo, a royal city in the Canaanite kingdom of Israel – and from which the word 'Armageddon' comes from – needed a fitting response. Egyptians would have to do.

And then there's Trump's argument of starting a 'preventive' war – more accurately, an 'inoculation war' to immunise it against the infection. Never mind that anti-vaxxers like US health secretary Robert F Kennedy Jr may be unconvinced.

Whichever way the US regime wants to play the Billy Joel song, 'We Didn't Start the Fire'/'We Did Start the Fire But Only So That It Wouldn't Start Burning,' the real challenge is to end it. And in this, like the way we follow all other major competitive sports, we have chosen 'our side', quietly cheering on not so much the wins, but defeats of the side we don't like. And let's be honest about the schadenfreude many of us are feeling when we call up that friend in Muscat or Dubai to check how he or she is doing in their Gulf club. One special thing about this war

'Gentlemen, you can't fight here! This is the War Room!'



GO ON MAN, FINISH SOMETHING YOU NEVER BEGAN

Imagine the generals in Pentagon trying to brief him: 'Mr President, we've deployed more missiles to prevent the war.' 'Good. But make sure we get more interceptors to stop their missiles, otherwise people will think it's a war. Let's start Operation Epic Purée to get the Ukrainians to give us the interceptors we had given them.' We've been here before. Or more precisely Herbert George Wells had, when he wrote his very non-prophetic 1914 book – people hadn't discovered reels yet – The War That Will End War. The central thesis of the book was that the result of the war that would be later called World War 1 would make future conflicts impossible. Trump seems to have not got the memo about Wells getting things terribly wrong. Incidentally, real lives are reportedly being affected. But this could be pure Persian propaganda.

indrajit.hazra@timesofindia.com



## RIP Body Positivity?

Alas! It's the end of the curve. Now what are you on about? It's the last nail in the body positivity coffin. It's dead. Gone. RIP. While we were busy learning to love our 'hip dips' and 'tummy rolls', the world was quietly moving the goalposts back to 1996 one injector pen shot at a time.

Are you talking about Ozempic? It's just a trend. Ozempic, Mounjaro and all such GLP-1 receptor agonists. And it's not a trend. Demna Gvasalia's Gucci debut was further proof. His Primavera show in Milan was a sea of 'second-skin' white hosiery and 'body-aware' silhouettes. The message was loud and clear: if you aren't skeletal, you aren't Gucci. The finale walk was by Kate Moss – the patron saint of 'heroic chic'. It's like the last ten years of inclusivity were just a fever dream.

But wasn't fashion finally becoming more diverse? Yeah well. The stats are grim. Plus-size representation on the runways has plummeted back to less than 1%. Last year the UK banned high street fashion adverts which featured models who looked 'unhealthily thin' and industry experts had warned of a return to the super-skinny trend.

So, now what? It's back to the drawing board of fighting the media perception of the 'ideal'. Even behavioral psychologists say we're hard-wired to chase the 'ideal', and right now, the 'ideal' is this. Even though some designers championed body diversity at London Fashion Week this year, it's too little, too late probably. Last year, model and activist Charli Howard wrote a viral open letter after being dropped by her modelling agency for being 'too big'. She's a UK 6-8. A decade on she says: 'I think we're on the cusp of seeing heroin chic return.'

That can't be good. Well, that's the skinny on that! Text: Team Sunday ET



### ET Sunday Crossword

|    |   |    |    |    |    |    |   |
|----|---|----|----|----|----|----|---|
| 1  | 2 | 3  | 4  | 5  | 6  | 7  | 8 |
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| 18 |   |    |    |    | 17 |    |   |
| 19 |   |    | 20 | 21 |    |    |   |
| 23 |   | 24 |    |    | 25 | 26 |   |
|    |   |    |    |    | 27 |    |   |
| 28 |   |    |    | 29 |    |    |   |
| 30 |   |    |    |    | 31 |    |   |

- ACROSS**
- Urgent need to exit agency, sacking volunteers (8)
  - Newly-wed couples top of luxury headgear at Ascot (6)
  - Quick pic of unexpected island at goal (8)
  - Sulphur greatly affected Israel's seafood (6)
  - It makes stuff emerge, indistinctly (4)
  - Dubious about Italian lady's wine (10)
  - Flasher in street can be a bolshevik (7,6)
  - A sign famine was widespread at
- DOWN**
- Waterloo, perhaps (13)
  - Start engaging fourth in drive (10)
  - Poor farmer's partly withdrawn crop (4)
  - Soldier trapped in overturned wagon? That's awful (6)
  - Alienate sergeant who's been busted (8)
  - Take turns bringing soldiers round gallery (6)
  - It may win point in court but lose one on course (4,4)

- 0158**
- Each pointless line's dropped with little effort (6)
  - Insect maturing and going off? Initially, yes (5)
  - Gaelic poetry lacks introduction (4)
  - Wear 150 old articles (7)
  - Old-numbered pages appearing in the correct order (5)
  - Order member and lecturer to catch taxi, last to depart (9)
  - It's instructive looking round department, if boring (8)
  - Room's better ventilated, some say (4)
  - Sign on staff – division's short (4)
  - Hedonist bachelor, 65, carrying on with soldier (3,6)
  - Poor accommodation closed after son left (3)
  - Game's over about 10, so leave (4)
  - Create sore feeling? I'm better swapping letters (8)
  - Places where shooting happens (4)
  - Consultant supplies answer and drives off (7)
  - Powerful businessman (6)
  - Fool identifies Cypriot, top and tail only (5)
  - Visitor at table's not far behind female (5)
  - Finish filming complicated war picture's opening (4)

# INTERNATIONAL EDITORIALS



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## YOUR VOICE

# Grover Cleveland and the lost art of saying no

By Jacob Lane

In high school, I put useless trivia knowledge to work on the quiz bowl team. I wasn't the fastest on the buzzer, but I learned quickly which names and facts came up repeatedly.

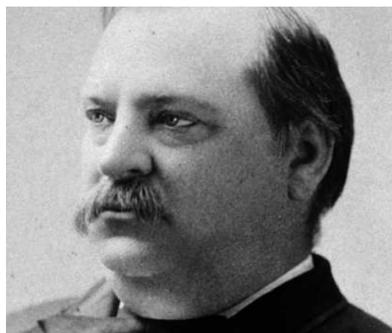
Grover Cleveland was one of those names. He was the only president to serve nonconsecutive terms. Of course, this was before Donald Trump's return to office.

Cleveland was always good for a point or two. Beyond that, I did not think much about him.

He was another name to memorize, somewhere between Presidents Millard Fillmore and Chester Arthur. If anything, I remembered Cleveland more for his thick, signature mustache more than his presidency.

That is probably true for most Americans. Cleveland lives in the margins of history books, remembered more for the fact that he served two nonconsecutive terms than for how he governed. He was not a wartime hero, nor did he leave behind a sweeping program that bore his name.

But the more you learn about him, the harder it is to ignore how unusual he was. Cleveland believed government should do less, spend less and stay within its limits. That was not just campaign rhetoric. It was how he approached the office.



President Grover Cleveland in Washington, circa 1888. CHARLES MILTON BELL/LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

To Cleveland, saying no was not a weakness. It was often the point.

You can see that clearly in 1887.

Congress passed a bill to send federal seed to drought-stricken farmers in Texas during a severe economic slump. Lawmakers stepped in to help. Cleveland vetoed the legislation. His explanation was blunt: "I can find no warrant for such an appropriation in the Constitution."

He did not question that farmers were struggling. He simply believed the Constitution did not authorize federal involve-

ment. To him, good intentions did not erase constitutional limits. That mindset defined his presidency.

Cleveland rose from mayor of Buffalo to governor of New York to the White House in just a few years. But what set him apart was not the speed of his ascent. It was how he governed once he arrived.

He treated public office as a public trust, not a steppingstone or a reward system.

At a time when political machines dominated state and city politics, Cleveland challenged patronage and favoritism. Taking on Tammany Hall was risky, but he pushed back. Even his friends were not immune.

He denied his former law partner and supporter, Wilson Bissell, a Cabinet post and a consulship. Personal loyalty did not come before public duty.

That kind of independence is hard to imagine in modern Washington. Politics still run on loyalty and access. The names and parties change, but the instincts remain.

Cleveland's most lasting mark came from his use of the veto pen. By the end of his two terms, he had vetoed more than 500 bills, more than double the total issued by all the presidents before him combined. Many were spending measures he believed exceeded constitutional authority.

In his view, wasting public money was not merely bad policy; it was a "crime

against the citizen."

He did not see the presidency as a vehicle for constant action. He saw it as a guardrail.

His job was not to hand out federal help whenever pressure mounted. It was to protect the Constitution and the taxpayer, even when doing so was unpopular.

Cleveland won the popular vote three times and, for more than a century, was the only president to serve nonconsecutive terms. Still, he rarely receives the recognition given to more celebrated leaders.

There are no towering monuments to him. No HBO miniseries or films with A-list actors. Restraint, it turns out, does not make for dramatic storytelling.

March 18 would have marked Cleveland's 189th birthday. It will likely pass with little fanfare, as it usually does. Little notice beyond a few historians. Just another date on the calendar.

For years, Cleveland was just a trivia answer to me. A name, a fact and a president with a killer mustache. Now I see something else: restraint. Discipline. The willingness to say no when it would have been easier to go along.

Washington could use a few more Grover Cleverlands.

*Jacob Lane is a Republican strategist based in Illinois.*

## Voice of the People

### Mexico fully prepared for World Cup

I read the editorial "Mayor, call FIFA to snag World Cup if Guadalajara cartel problems prove insurmountable" (Feb. 24), which raises the possibility of relocating four FIFA World Cup 2026 matches currently scheduled to be held in Guadalajara, citing security concerns. I love that Chicagoans are embracing soccer, and I respect how much sports are an essential part of the city's essence; however, in this case I have to say, not so fast, my friends!

On Feb. 22, Mexican Armed Forces carried out a successful operation in Jalisco that hit at the core one of the region's most dangerous criminal organizations. In the immediate aftermath, isolated acts of violence followed the death of a high-ranking criminal leader and the arrest of more than 70 members of this criminal group. Since then, the situation has stabilized, airports are fully operating and daily life has resumed across the affected areas.

The decisive action of the Mexican government is positive for families on both sides of the border who suffer the devastating consequences of the activities of these transnational criminals. This encouraging result is a testament to the heroism of Mexican forces, particularly of those who lost their lives in the line of duty, and reaffirms the effectiveness of ongoing cooperation between Mexico and the United States, including the intelligence-sharing that supported the operation. This is exactly what works when combating an international violent threat to our communities: collaboration.

Mexico is fully prepared to host an exceptional tournament, one that will allow fans from around the world to celebrate the unifying power of soccer, as FIFA President Gianni Infantino recently stated. As always, Mexicans will rise to the occasion with efficiency, creativity and fun, to make sure all attendees feel safe and successfully enjoy every match of the 2026 World Cup.

The ties between Chicago and Mexico run deep culturally, economically and, of course, through a shared passion for soccer. Today, more than ever, this trilateral World Cup offers an opportunity not only to celebrate sports, but also to recognize the strength of friendship and collaboration between our two nations.

— *Reyna Torres Mendivil, consul general of Mexico, Chicago, and dean, Chicago Consular Corps*

### Conversation with cabbie

I applaud Andy Shaw's recent opinion piece ("Mexico, like Chicago, is more than just its worst headlines," Feb. 28). My family visits Mexico yearly. We love the people, the culture and the beaches. We enjoy seeing the sights. One time while taking a taxi ride to Zihuatanejo, Mexico, the friendly cabdriver asked me where I was from.

"Chicago," I replied. "Beautiful city," he said. "Have you ever been there?" I asked. He turned his head and responded, "No, too dangerous."

— *Jim Wunderlich, Libertyville*

### Mexico a friendly place

I entirely agree with Andy Shaw's piece about Mexico. My wife, dog and I flew into Puerto Vallarta recently on our way to our



NICK ANDERSON/THE CONTRARIAN

home in Sayulita. We had a smooth trip through the airport and on the highway to Sayulita and are enjoying Sayulita where there has been no violence.

Shaw is correct that the cartels are an issue in Mexico, but this latest outbreak was not directed at civilians or tourists. It rarely is. I have not seen a report of a tourist being injured related to it.

My wife and I founded a tuition-free preschool in Sayulita and live here more than half of the year. We also have traveled throughout Mexico. We have never experienced or witnessed any violence. People walk freely in Sayulita all hours of the night and day.

Mexico is a beautiful country with warm, wonderful people; fabulous culture; and delicious food.

Isn't it time that the U.S. stop bullying a country we attacked and whose land we stole (in the Mexican-American War) and whose cartels get guns from us, cartels that sell the majority of their drugs to us?

We have traveled extensively around the world. Mexico is one of the friendliest countries on the globe.

— *Lawrence Casazza, Glen Ellyn*

### Regulate robotaxis

The rise of robotaxis promises to reshape our streets, our safety and our communities. But if there's one lesson we should have learned from the last transportation revolution, it's this: When we let

tech companies set the rules, the public pays the price.

Uber didn't just change how we travel. It flooded streets with drivers, bypassed taxi regulations, undercut public transit and reshaped traffic patterns with limited oversight. The result: congestion, regulatory confusion, and many drivers and passengers left vulnerable.

We cannot afford to make the same mistake with robotaxis.

Autonomous vehicles are being deployed in cities across the country, and they're being tested in Chicago. And while Silicon Valley tech giants promise convenience and innovation, they rarely talk about who bears the cost when something goes wrong. And make no mistake — things will go wrong.

Robotaxis still struggle with complex real-world situations: navigating unpredictable pedestrians, interpreting construction zones and reacting to erratic human drivers. Cities need proactive safety standards before these cars hit the streets. This means mandatory testing, transparent reporting of crashes and "near misses," and substantial penalties for noncompliance.

When an autonomous vehicle causes a crash, who pays? Current ride-share insurance minimums already leave many victims undercompensated and confused. With robotaxis, the uncertainty only increases — liability could be shifted

between the software company, the vehicle manufacturer or some other corporate entity, leaving injured people caught in the middle.

If these crashes are treated as product liability cases, victims will face longer, more expensive battles against well-funded corporations just to recover basic medical expenses. Lawmakers should act now to require strong insurance minimums and clearly assign responsibility, treating autonomous vehicle crashes as standard motor vehicle claims handled through ordinary auto insurance — not complex product litigation.

We can't sit idly by and let tech companies dictate the terms. The decisions made today will determine whether autonomous vehicles improve public safety — or undermine it.

Public officials, regulators and community advocates must demand that these companies come into our cities on our terms, not theirs. Because once robotaxis take over the roadways, we won't get a second chance to set the rules.

— *Bryant Greening, attorney and co-founder, LegalRideshare LLC*

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# Opinion

The New York Times

## Noem Is Gone, but the Chaos and Brutality Are Not



DAMON WINTER/THE NEW YORK TIMES

**Michelle Cottle**

A writer in Opinion who covers national politics.

AS I looked at Kristi Noem's MAGA-fied visage plastered across the media on Thursday, along with the news that President Trump had fired her, I couldn't help thinking: This was always going to end in tears.

Not because the defenestrated secretary of homeland security was uniquely bad at her job. Sure, "ICE Barbie," as her critics dubbed her, was no paragon of competence. Her handling of ICE agents' bloody rampage across Minneapolis was appalling — as, really, was her aggressive defense of the president's entire deportation orgy. (That photo op field trip to the Salvadoran prison? Pure trash.) Her leadership style was, at best, chaotic. Her congressional testimony this week was defensive, dishonest, bumbling and self-contradictory. Her relentless self-promotion was embarrassing and more than a little foolish given who she works for. Rule No. 1 in Trumpworld: Never steal the spotlight from the boss.

Still, Ms. Noem was hardly the most incompetent, embarrassing or dangerous member of Mr. Trump's cabinet. The competition is too steep.

No, I thought about how she owed her post to her laborious transformation into a

particular kind of ultra-MAGA woman who kicks butt while always looking picture perfect — superfeminine and superaggressive — a role that comes with built-in challenges and limited room for error. The more furiously Ms. Noem contorted herself to fit this Trumpworld mold and catch the attention of the MAGA guys, the more she risked earning the contempt of the very people she wanted to impress, especially the president. Then, when she outlasted her usefulness, she was casually sloughed off.

Who could have predicted that one? Besides everyone.

Respect never seemed to be part of the equation with Mr. Trump and Ms. Noem. It's hard to respect someone so eager to remake herself for your attention. Her physical MAGA makeover may be the most striking of any senior figure in Mr. Trump's orbit. More disturbing was her scramble to prove herself the toughest cookie in the jar.

The most haunting stories from her 2024 memoir are on this theme. Her shooting her puppy. Her making up a story about meeting Kim Jong-un. Her claiming that Nikki Haley once psychologically menaced her, sending the message that "there was only room for one Republican woman in the spotlight" and that Ms. Haley wanted to make sure Ms. Noem knew her "place."

It's not hard to imagine why an ambitious woman might adopt an exaggerated, tough

persona to fit in with a movement defined by chest thumping so heavy-handed it smells like misogyny. But Ms. Noem's desperation to turn herself into a glambot enforcer was always just . . . sad.

It surely did nothing to help the secretary's sense of self-worth that no one in the administration, much less the larger political world, took her seriously in her post. She was the face of an immigration policy that everyone assumed was being driven by the White House aide Stephen Miller and others, and presumably will continue to be.

But here's where Ms. Noem really did herself in. With her high profile and her efforts to prove how hard-core she was — for instance, accusing the two Americans gunned down by immigration officials in Minneapolis of being domestic terrorists — she made herself a perfect scapegoat for the administration's unpopular immigration agenda. No matter that some of her worst moments came as she tried to defend Mr. Trump's morally indefensible policies. The president can now claim credit for firing a very bad employee, even as he and Mr. Miller continue promoting chaos and brutality.

It surely stings to be the first member of this cabinet to get the ax. Not Pete Hegseth? Pam Bondi? Lori Chavez-DeRemer? Robert F. Kennedy Jr.? But Ms. Noem can take solace in knowing she is not the first ambitious woman who tried to remake herself in the

**It's hard out there for a MAGA woman.**

MAGA image only to be misused and ultimately discarded.

Elise Stefanik, a U.S. House member from New York, has traveled a similarly humiliating road. One of her party's rising stars in the pre-Trump era, Ms. Stefanik followed the president down the dark MAGA path, visions of higher office dancing in her head. But time and again, she had her dreams sacrificed to Mr. Trump's political needs — first her aborted nomination to the United Nations, then her aborted campaign for governor. She will leave the House at the end of this term with little to show for her self-debasement other than a reputation for shape shifting and sycophancy.

As Ms. Noem is finding out, it's hard out there for a MAGA woman. You have to jump through trickier hoops than the men to get attention, but your efforts to please can work against you. The second your swaggering performance becomes a problem, the president kicks you to the curb. Just ask Marjorie Taylor Greene, who, after falling out with the president, fled the House and is now devoting herself to viciously critiquing his Iran policy.

Maybe Ms. Noem should consider a similar route, using her newfound freedom to tell the public how she really feels about what she was asked to do and defend in Mr. Trump's name. She might even claw back some of that self-worth she gave up along the way.

## Our Hospice System Subverts the Very Point of Hospice Care

**Sandeep Jauhar**

A cardiologist in New York who writes frequently about medical care and public health.

WHEN my siblings and I decided to put our father in hospice care at his home in the spring of 2021, his Alzheimer's was near end-stage. He could barely get out of bed or dress or feed himself. Hospice care seemed to be the best way for him to end his life with dignity.

Nearly all Medicare hospice patients receive care in their residence. So, as is standard, we enlisted the services of a Medicare-approved hospice agency.

We soon encountered a harsh reality, however. Dying at home isn't easy, even with hospice care. The hospice system, we learned, requires family involvement in the dying process to a degree that even we, as a family of doctors, weren't comfortable with. We were responsible for bathing my father and helping him use the toilet, changing his clothes and, most daunting, administering morphine and other sedatives to treat his pain and anxiety. A nurse was scheduled to come to the house only for about an hour twice a week. Getting an aide to help with basic activities of daily living was nearly impossible.

The main problem was funding. In 2024, the average per-patient Medicare payment to hospice agencies was about \$200 a day,

with an annual cap of \$33,500. That outlay would barely pay for a part-time aide, yet it is also needed to cover medications, medical equipment and nurse visits. So hospice agencies are forced to shift the bulk of responsibilities to families as the dying process unfolds over weeks or months.

I remember a Friday evening when we decided that my father, who had stopped swallowing, was severely dehydrated and needed intravenous fluid. The hospice agency wasn't equipped to provide that service, even as a comfort measure, so my brother drove to a hospital to get an IV kit and a few bags of saline and then came back to the house and inserted the IV catheter himself, as my father kicked and hollered. When my brother was done, he tied the bag of fluid to a ceiling fan with some sewing thread because we didn't have an IV pole.

Ironically, we could have put my father in an acute-care hospital bed costing \$3,000 a day without any pushback from Medicare. The Medicare hospice benefit is supposed to provide a cost-effective alternative at home to expensive end-of-life care in hospitals. But by providing so little funding, Medicare too often makes hospice care an unviable option.

Our family was fortunate that we had the resources to provide the care my father needed. My siblings and I divided up responsibilities, and one of us stayed with him at all times. But many families are unable to manage and are forced to move their loved

**Families have to bear far too many responsibilities when caring for loved ones.**

one to a hospital or a nursing home (or in the rare cases that Medicare allows for it, an inpatient hospice facility). Patients themselves may choose to die in an institutional setting for fear of being a burden on their families or not receiving adequate symptom relief.

Sadly, the practice of relying so heavily on families subverts the very purpose for which hospice care was created. When Cicely Saunders, a nurse and doctor, opened the first modern hospice program in London in 1967, she laid out three guiding principles for easing the process of dying: relief of physical pain, preservation of dignity and respect for the psychological and spiritual aspects of death.

In my family's experience of the hospice system, all these principles were compromised. The care responsibilities we had to shoulder were more than we were emotionally prepared to take on in those grieving final days. And my father's dignity and comfort would have been better served with more guidance from nurse specialists on how to administer his pain medications and sedatives.

Tight hospice budgets can compromise care in even more serious ways. Not long ago, a patient of mine with end-stage heart disease was being moved from the hospital to hospice care at home. I appealed to a hospice director to approve a standard medication for him that helped control his shortness of breath and nausea. My patient had

been on the drug at the hospital, and staying on it at home was essential to his comfort. Yet my application was denied. The hospice director said that the medication was too expensive, even if, as expected, my patient had less than a month to live.

I could have tried to get my patient admitted to an inpatient hospice facility, where he could have gotten the drug he needed more easily, but he wanted to die at home. So, reluctantly, I had to send him home without it.

Compounding all these issues is the fact that dying in America is increasingly corporatized. Today, about three-quarters of hospice agencies are for-profit, and many are owned by private equity companies. It is hardly a stretch to imagine that many of these companies skimp on care to protect their bottom line.

The key to a better hospice experience would be more in-home support — a minimum number of hours of aide visits per week, for example. This would require increasing Medicare hospice budgets, of course. In the current political climate, that may be a hard sell, though in the end it would almost certainly save money by avoiding costly hospitalizations.

Fortunately, our family was able to keep our father at home till the end, as was his wish. Yet when I reflect on our experience, I am reminded of what an older woman with terminal heart disease once told me: "My husband said the hardest thing to do is to die. I always thought it would be easy."

# Khamenei Is Dead. No One Knows What's Next.

Azadeh Moaveni

An associate professor of journalism at New York University.

THE face of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has loomed over every significant milestone of my life — of everyone's life — in Iran. The requisite photo of him that was hung in every public space, where people learned, worked, lunched, transacted, watched theater, saw art and visited the doctor, altered over the years. In my youth, in his middle age, his image was toothy and callow. As the years passed, his expression grew truculent, his beard gray. But he was always there, always watching.

You get the face you deserve, said Henri Cartier-Bresson. Ayatollah Khamenei never developed the fleshy, decayed look of Muammar el-Qaddafi or the hooded rage of Saddam Hussein. Age turned his image haughty and domineering, rather than mad and ravaged. Yet he outlived them, our seemingly immortal dictator, resisting every effort to oppose and resist him — at the ballot box, through elite maneuvering, through sly satire, through years of protests, first by varying segments of society and then increasingly most of them at the same time.

The permanence of his image signified the control of the regime. His baleful gaze insisted on its preservation at any cost, with a brutality that created thousands of other images framed and placed in Iranian homes: remembrances of the citizens who protested and defied the system over the years and were killed by his coercive apparatus.

Now he is dead, killed by the American and Israeli military campaign underway. Will another face replace his and carry on a version of the same story, collapsing what is true and what is false? Will the regime elite reshuffle itself, dispense with the business of having a symbolic face at all and recalibrate in order to survive? This is the dreaded scenario, a riff on the outcome in Venezuela, in which a pragmatic regime figure assumes power and brokers a cease-fire with the United States, meeting Washington's surrender demands in return for allowing the regime to carry on in some zombie form, its fundamental nature intact. Surviving at any cost was always worth it to the supreme leader, and this outcome would be his vindication.

THE AYATOLLAH PEERED over us during our most banal and our most intimate moments. He was on the wall when I married in a notary office and when I checked into the hospital to have my son. He was on the wall of the office where I received my first press card to report my first story in Iran.

It was July 1999, a decade into his supreme leadership. In the middle of a summer night, plainclothes police officers and militiamen raided a dormitory at the University of Tehran. Students earlier that day protested the closure of a reformist newspaper, and for that they were punished. The militiamen broke into their rooms, set their beds and belongings on fire and threw several of the students out of windows. Four were killed, and hundreds were wounded or detained.

Tehran erupted in protests; the streets smelled of burning tires. Ayatollah Khamenei pretended the violence had nothing to do with him. With his trademark faux magnanimity, he said the students must be dealt with patiently — even “if they set my picture on fire or tear it.” No one used to do that back then, but it was almost as if he anticipated that defacing his image or tearing it up would one day become commonplace.

One family of a student who died in that raid tried to bring his killers to justice. A judge considered the case and threw it out. The supreme leader's face was on the wall of the courtroom.

His face stared at us from the walls of Iran during so many moments of dark injustice that his face became inseparable from the immorality of the regime. In the fall of 2021, after tens of thousands of Iranians had died of Covid, I accompanied an elderly relative to a vaccination center in Tehran to get a shot. At the start of the year, Ayatollah Khamenei banned vaccines made in America and Britain, calling them “untrustworthy.” In the summer he posed for photographers at the same center supposedly receiving a locally made vaccine, unevicenced and produced by a conglomerate controlled by him. Some Western vaccines were eventually allowed in and reserved for the elderly. A nurse that fall at the vaccination center nodded at the ayatollah's face on the wall



ASLON ARFA/REDUX

and, shaking her head, told me she thought he had really gotten AstraZeneca's shot.

Those who challenged him often died in mysterious and awful ways. Dissidents were hacked to death by assailants with machetes. In June 2009 his great political rival and fellow revolutionary Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani warned the supreme leader in a personal letter that he must accept change or “volcanoes fueled from burning hearts will emerge in society.” Mr. Rafsanjani quoted the 13th-century Persian poet Saadi at the letter's end: “A stream of water can be diverted with a small shovel, but once it grows, even an elephant cannot stop its flow.”

The same month, believing the result of the presidential election to be fraudulent, a million Iranians poured into the streets. Many young protesters were arrested and taken to a detention center south of Tehran called Kahrizak, where many were tortured and some allegedly raped. Less than 10 years later, Mr. Rafsanjani was found floating in a pool, said to have suffered a heart attack while swimming. His bodyguards had apparently been away, and security cameras had been turned off.

Ayatollah Khamenei's most-despised adversaries — intellectuals and political rivals — bore his specific, spiteful rage. But thou-

## Iran needs to break its cycle of one dictatorship replacing another.

sands of people were killed in protests or imprisoned over the years, and just last month he oversaw the fastest, largest mass slaughter in modern Iranian history.

ON SATURDAY, WHEN I first saw the words “Ali Khamenei has been killed” flash on a television screen, I felt choked. The distance between that possibility and all the years of being gripped by fear of him could not be crossed. There was no relief in that first moment, just a flood of grief for all the suffering and the bleak inheritance he had left us. Then came an hour of uncertainty and frantic messaging: Are we sure? How can we be sure? What if it's a feint? The hopeful among us saw confirmation in the pale, nervous stuttering of an Iranian government spokesman refusing to confirm whether the dictator was alive; the pessimists, wishing to avoid disappointment, held out until President Trump announced the death.

Released from the grip of life under Ayatollah Khamenei, tens of millions of Iranians — inside the country and out — will grasp at whole new ways to contemplate the future. The possibilities are precarious and depend, in part, on how the days ahead unfold. But for the first time in 47 years, there will be possibilities: for Iranians to consider how they want to be governed, as opposed to just thinking about what they don't want; how to artic-

ulate a new Iranian identity; and how to relate to one another outside the logic of repression.

Even if the war carries on for weeks, even if Iran returns to talks after inflicting what damage it can on U.S. targets, its Arab neighbors and Israel, Iran's fundamental crises remain: the economy on the brink of collapse and the state at open war with its citizenry. Any new dispensation will have to resolve people's need to eat and survive and to reconcile their dreams of secular, accountable government.

There is a dignity in this pause and the chance to envision the path to a different kind of rule — whether it might wind through a transitional return to constitutional monarchy, a steppingstone to whatever system comes next, all prefaced by the need for gozaar, or moving beyond, from the failed Islamic model.

IN THE HOURS after news of the supreme leader's death, satellite images of the blackened, bombed-out crater of his official residential and administrative compound surfaced. It was a sorrow to see, because it was the family residence of my close relatives many years ago. That district of the city has been the seat of Iran's rulers since the Qajar dynasty, which ruled from 1789 to 1925 — and a scene of caprice, lawlessness and confiscation for over a century. Reza Shah Pahlavi, the first Pahlavi monarch, expelled Qajar families from the quarter in the 1920s and expropriated their property, and the Islamic republic expelled and expropriated both the Pahlavi elites and what remained of the Qajar elites after the revolution in 1979.

Many Iranians today yearn for an idealized Iran of the past — an inclusive, less authoritarian, culturally flourishing Iran, wreathed in nostalgia for the glory of monarchy, with its imperial pomp and mirror mosaic palaces. It may be compelling to conjure the aesthetics of the distant past, of royal families who lived in graceful palaces, feted the world's dignitaries and outperformed the whole region by every measure. The present is a time of corruption and impoverishment, with the currency effectively collapsed and millions of people unable to afford enough to eat. Recalling when it wasn't that way is part of survival.

While many yearn for this idealized past, others, far fewer, are grieving what just ended and the patronage it secured them. With time, new divisions and contestations will emerge, as they always have in this large and diverse land, but they will take forms we cannot yet anticipate.

The reality of Iran's past is the triumph of one dictatorship over another, forced secular authoritarianism, followed by forced Islamism. That is the destructive cycle that needs to be broken, the cycle of land grabbing and score settling, in which leaders are more concerned with erasing their predecessors than improving the lives of their citizens.

No one doubts that Iranians wish to build a better future. Doing that requires reconciling with the past, with each era's follies, and refusing to repeat them.

## LETTERS

### Trump's Removal of Kristi Noem

TO THE EDITOR:

Re “Trump Fires Noem as Chief of D.H.S. After Rocky Term” (front page, March 6):

I welcome the news that Kristi Noem has been removed as the secretary of the Department of Homeland Security.

Under her tenure, at least 32 people died in ICE custody. More than 170 U.S. citizens were wrongfully detained by immigration officials. This is in addition to her gross failure to recognize Senator Alex Padilla, Democrat of California, when he attempted to ask her a question last summer, resulting in his violent handcuffing at the height of the immigration raids in Los Angeles.

The nation is better off now that Ms. Noem is leaving, but that should not exclude her from being held accountable for the transgressions committed during her time in office.

STEVEN ALMAZAN  
LOS ANGELES

TO THE EDITOR:

I do not mean it ironically when I say that Kristi Noem has certain similarities to Abraham Lincoln. Ms. Noem is a Westerner. She lost a parent at a young age. Her education was interrupted, and she had to work to support her family.

As a freshman in Congress in 2011, she became a member of the House leadership, acting as a bridge between Speaker John Boehner and Tea Party insurgents, a uniter not a divider.

In other important ways, however, Ms. Noem is no Lincoln. The main gap seems to be in how she chose to lead once she left the House.

By 2019, she had been elected governor of South

Dakota, and when the pandemic hit, everything went sideways. Ms. Noem opposed masking and promoted hydroxychloroquine, and citizens of her state paid the price with one of the highest per capita infection rates in the country.

She has learned and adopted President Trump's misguided, overconfident political style, one that has served her poorly as the homeland security secretary.

Whether she can fix things after having failed so publicly is hard to say. She may be forced to wander politics like a modern-day Dan Quayle or Sarah Palin.

STUART GALLANT  
BELMONT, MASS.

TO THE EDITOR:

Although I am extremely happy to see Kristi Noem get fired, President Trump's pick to replace her at the Department of Homeland Security, Senator Markwayne Mullin, Republican of Oklahoma, is simply a male version of her — another “yes” person who will take direction from his boss.

And let's remember that Mr. Mullin is the same guy who challenged Sean O'Brien, the president of the Teamsters, to a fight during a Senate hearing, even getting up from his seat. More significantly, Mr. Mullin called Alex Pretti, an innocent American citizen who was killed by federal agents during the ICE siege in Minneapolis, a “deranged individual who came in to cause massive damage with a loaded pistol.”

This is who will be the new homeland secretary? We are in for another bumpy ride!

MICHAEL HADJIARGYROU  
CENTERPORT, N.Y.

### The Parking Dance: Which Move Is Better?

TO THE EDITOR:

Re “Backing In or Out of a Growing Parking Debate” (Sunday Styles, Feb. 22):

As a retired UPS employee who worked for 33 years in transportation, I was taught from Day 1 to “back first” so the vehicle faced out when I returned.

The safety advantage that the article did not highlight is that when you approach an empty space, you have good visibility of what is in the space and around you. Are there any obstacles in the space, or are there any people or animals around that you need to be aware of?

Once you leave your vehicle, conditions can change without your knowledge. A child or an animal could be behind your vehicle (below or outside your camera's coverage). Litter could have been left that could damage a tire or worsen a mess.

Backing in to a parking spot reduces accidents, and as people get more experience with it, it does not make parking lot congestion worse.

KRIS OSWOLD, SEATTLE

TO THE EDITOR:

As an international business scholar who studies culture and economic performance, I had long pondered why backing in parking is more prevalent in some countries. Around 2012, I had an “aha!” moment: It exemplifies delayed gratification. Much like an investment,

it demands more time and effort upfront to yield benefits later, such as a faster and safer departure from crowded lots.

In a subsequent study, I examined parking habits in six countries. China led with 88 percent of drivers backing in, while the U.S. had the lowest rate, at 5.7 percent. Notably, places with higher rates, such as China and Taiwan, correlated strongly with robust economic indicators — higher productivity gains, G.D.P. growth and savings rates.

This pattern suggests that everyday behaviors like parking may reflect broader cultural tendencies toward long-term thinking and productivity.

SHAOMIN LI, NORFOLK, VA.

The writer is a professor of international business at Old Dominion University.

TO THE EDITOR:

I drive a sedan. If I pull into a space, it is a harrowing experience trying to back out when invariably sandwiched between two behemoth SUVs.

So I pull through or back in if necessary, although I prefer to park away from those SUVs if I can. (Please, are you all taking an entire hockey team to practice every day?)

While they are vying for parking spaces close to the store, causing congestion, I have parked with few cars around and walked.

EILEEN ST. ONGE  
HANOVER, MASS.

### Meta's Facial Recognition Raises Red Flags

TO THE EDITOR:

Re “Meta to Add Face ID Tech to Its Glasses” (Business, Feb. 16):

Technology is a double-edged sword. It can improve lives but can also supercharge violations of our civil rights and civil liberties. That's why Meta's planned rollout of facial recognition technology in its smart glasses is so dangerous.

Meta fails to grapple with the proven flaws of this technology or the very real potential for abuse. The technology would enable stalkers to identify their targets in public and hand bad actors a new tool to identify who goes to abortion clinics, gay bars, A.A. meetings or synagogues, mosques, churches or other houses of worship.

Anonymity and privacy are core to civil rights and civil liberties, but once again Meta is showing reckless disregard in its ever-undeterred effort to “move fast and break things.” Meta has deliberately cut civil rights and civil liberties out of its calculus.

As an internal Meta memo

reasoned, “Many civil society groups that we would expect to attack us would have their resources focused on other concerns.” The company presumably sees a business opportunity in the ongoing assault on American democracy.

That's where Mark Zuckerberg, Meta's chief executive, is wrong: We are paying attention, and we understand clearly that this technology is part of that very same assault on our rights. We are always ready to fight, and we will continue to defend everyone's rights — from both the government and Big Tech.

CODY VENZKE, WASHINGTON

The writer is a senior policy counsel for the American Civil Liberties Union.

The Times welcomes letters from readers. Letters must include the writer's name, address and telephone number. Those selected may be edited, and shortened to fit allotted space. Email: letters@nytimes.com



ABBAS/MAGNUM PHOTOS

## OPINION

THE WEEKEND INTERVIEW with Ali M. Ansari | By Elliot Kaufman

## Is Iran on the Brink of Another Revolution?

Everywhere you look, there's another expert to tell you what won't happen—what can't happen—in Iran. Regime change is impossible. Never mind the mass protests of January; the regime has the guns and is willing to use them. Never mind the airstrikes on leaders and thugs; you can't topple a regime from the air. Trust the political science.

Ali M. Ansari has a different view. "I'm a firm believer in what Hannah Arendt says: Revolutions are impossible before they happen and inevitable after they happen." Prof. Ansari, 58, is a historian at Scotland's University of St. Andrews, where he directs the Institute for Iranian Studies. His 2024 book, "Iran," is the best primer available on the nation's modern history. He worries that social scientists and international-relations types "have become so wedded to their templates that they can't see" what has happened inside Iran.

"The vast majority of people are struggling. The political system is hated. The economic system isn't delivering," he says in a video interview. Salaries "no longer meet the basic needs of life. There's an environmental crisis—they've drained the water table. And now, they have an international crisis." That's putting it mildly.

### The regime faces a crisis like never before, and the nation has a 120-year tradition of fighting to establish the rule of law.

"Every crisis you can think of, the Islamic Republic is facing," Mr. Ansari says. "People tell me, 'Oh, but it's strong and stable.' Well, it can't be that strong and stable because people are rebelling every few years, and on a scale the regime deems existential." Regime supporters, whom Mr. Ansari pegs at 10% to 20% of the population, "are convinced they are going to defeat the U.S. in this war." He pauses: "They are not going to do it."

The professor stresses humility. We don't know if the regime will fall. But he doesn't buy the claim that the protest movement was crushed for good in January—and not only because the U.S. and Israel are creating a new opening.

"The regime carried out such a mass slaughter that it actually proved counterproductive," he says. "If they had suppressed it with, say, 'only' the 3,117 dead that they claim, it might have succeeded." But having killed "10,000, 15,000, 20,000 of your own in the random manner that they did—and shooting people in hospital beds—it creates an anger that is difficult to suppress." Students had resumed protesting before the airstrikes began on Feb. 28.

The analogy to China's 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre fails for a variety of reasons. For one, Beijing had something to offer its people: "Yes, we've politically sup-

pressed you, but we've bought you off with economic success, and we're now going to be a superpower." In Iran, what are they offering? All the regime can say to Iranians is, "You are going to have a great time in heaven when you get there."

Besides, we already heard, after Iran's brutal repression of protests in 2019 and again in 2022, "that the protest movement had decided going out on the streets isn't worth it, because 'all we do is get shot,'" he says. "Then suddenly, this burst on the scene in January," more rebellious than ever. Pulling back the lens reveals the "accelerated means of protests—mounting, mounting, mounting"—a "persistent and recurring tendency to protest and try to fight for their liberty."

This is one legacy of the 1906 Constitutional Revolution, which won for Iran a "liberal constitution in the Anglo-American tradition" and established the ideal, if not the practice, of the rule of law. While the 1979 Islamic Revolution steals the spotlight, 1906 has "had a much more profound impact on political ideas and activism," Mr. Ansari argues in his 2024 book. This tradition remains a live alternative. Iran is no nation-building project but a real nation with a modern state that the ayatollahs inherited from the shahs.

Textbooks say the Islamic Revolution started in January 1978, with an article in Ettelaat newspaper that insulted Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. It sparked protests, "but I can tell you," Mr. Ansari says, "nobody noticed at the time that the revolution had started." He remembers going to the cinema in Tehran as a 10-year-old in April 1978 to see "The Spy Who Loved Me," the James Bond film, dubbed in Persian. "This, in the middle of a revolution? I don't think so," he says.

Mr. Ansari—the son of an Iranian ambassador and a distant cousin of Farah Pahlavi, the shah's widow—was sent off to boarding school in the U.K. in June 1978, "which was fairly good timing." He returned to Iran to do academic fieldwork in the 1990s and wrote his thesis on the political myths constructed by the Pahlavi dynasty (1925-79) to legitimize its rule.

Mr. Ansari worked hard in subsequent years to encourage Iran and the West to have a more constructive relationship. But the Islamic Republic has spurned the Anglo-American ideals of 1906 and even the French ideals that informed the 1979 revolution. Instead of anchoring a modern republic in Iran's Shiite tradition, as the revolutionaries had promised, "the supreme leader became a sort of religious monarch," Mr. Ansari says. Parliament was rendered "an empty shell."

When I raise the media speculation that Iran could now devolve into a security state run by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Mr. Ansari can't hold back: "It already is!" And this isn't the early IRGC, with its "brotherhood in arms and no ranks," he says. "It became a business conglomerate and a political force gradually—"



and then suddenly. Under President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-13), auditing bodies were dismantled and many state assets transferred to the IRGC. By one assessment, \$800 billion in revenue went missing.

"A lot of them in the IRGC made a lot of money," Mr. Ansari says, "and they don't want to lose it all." That's now a stronger motivation to fight than old revolutionary fervor: "I don't think the IRGC is some sort of homogenous, unified, ideologically coherent unit of hundreds of thousands of men." (That figure includes the *basij* paramilitary.)

The core group may be driven "by a sort of Shia millenarianism, devoted to Khomeini as a cult," Mr. Ansari says, "but it's not an organization that doesn't fray at the edges and have a variety of views on the periphery and different groups within." If the U.S. and Israel grind down the regime, throwing into question its ability to repress the people, he expects some IRGC factions to split off.

Others will fight on as a matter of personal survival. Defectors have been promised amnesty, but the Revolutionary Guards know Iranians will have difficulty forgiving them. "The last shah lost his nerve," Mr. Ansari says, "but many of his supporters also had places to go. They escaped to the U.S. and Europe. Where are these guys going to go?"

Americans' temptation to reach an agreement with the regime works in the ayatollahs' favor. "You can make any number of deals with the Islamic Republic of Iran," Mr. Ansari says. "They will all be interim. Nothing will last." Consider the nuclear talks that preceded the war. Mere weeks after "probably the most appalling slaughter of Iranians by their government in 200 years," Mr. Ansari says, "we get into negotiations, and suddenly, we're all talking about centrifuges and the Iranians have stolen the narrative." That polarized the U.S. discussion along partisan lines, ensuring that almost all Democrats would oppose the eventual war.

The West typically errs in "fighting on terrain chosen by the regime," Mr. Ansari says. President

Obama began by accepting that Iran's problems were ultimately America's fault. Then, when Iranian protests broke out in 2009 over a stolen election, Mr. Obama "served notice, to all who could hear, that a nuclear settlement . . . trumped the rights of individual Iranians," Mr. Ansari writes in his 2024 book. The deal's salesmen claimed that resolving the clash with the U.S. would set Iran on a path to political liberalization. "The reality was that Iran's approach to its international relations would be dictated by domestic politics, which were hardening by the day."

The U.S. military option, supposedly "on the table" as a threat to Iran's regime, instead became a weapon against American opponents of a nuclear deal. The agreement was "reasonable" on its face, Mr. Ansari says, "but people treated it as if it were some sort of holy grail." It ended up restraining America, not Iran. In Syria, "the Russians and Iranians piled in and half a million Syrians died in that war." Mr. Obama didn't intervene for fear of upsetting Iran and scuttling the nuclear deal. "The agreement was meant to tie Iran's hands," he says, "not tie your own hands."

When President Trump quit the Obama deal in 2018, Mr. Ansari recalls, "we in the West were all saying, 'Oh my God, isn't Trump a son of a bitch?'" But most Iranians didn't care. They hadn't seen any benefit from the deal." The regime dithered rather than take steps necessary for U.S. economic engagement.

For Iranians, the real story was 2009, when hope for domestic political reform died. "But of course we miss that in the West," Mr. Ansari says. "We're so fixated on what we think we're doing about security and nuclear—which has its place—that we don't understand what's going on inside the country."

For the same reason, some in the West are now "bewildered that young Iranians will cheer because the Americans have started bombing them," he says. "What they want is a better life. A normal life. They want to be able to travel to America or study there."

This gets at the main problem Mr. Ansari sees with Western analysis: "We fail to give the Iranians

agency in what they do." When Iran's economy is in shambles, the reflex is to blame U.S. sanctions. "That doesn't explain why the Iranians have mismanaged their water. It doesn't tell you why, well before the real sanctions arrived in 2011-12, they were never able to get any foreign direct investment into the country. Now, why is that?" he asks. "It's internal. It's the corruption, the kleptocracy, the short-termism, the opaqueness, the lack of accountability, the uncertainty." Sanctions didn't make life easier, he says, but they didn't *be-fall* Iran. They were a consequence of the regime's behavior.

Today's war is another example. "We are here in many ways because the Iranians have been chanting 'Death to America' for 47 years. I used to say, 'I don't think this is helpful.'" Western interlocutors and intermediaries would respond that the regime didn't really mean it. "Well, if they don't mean it, then don't say it. Stop. But they never would," he says. "To be honest, I think they got away with things for so long that they got used to it."

They didn't count on a president who would break from standard operating procedure, whom they couldn't stall until the next U.S. election. Mr. Ansari says Iran had every chance to avert war. But it lost Europe by siding with Russia in Ukraine, and it refused to make a plausible offer when Mr. Trump returned to office. "The longer they waited, the worse it got. They could've gotten a deal six months ago. But when ships are waiting outside, the asking price goes up."

The regime insisted throughout on a "right to enrich uranium"—which "would have more credibility if they respected any other rights as well," Mr. Ansari cracks. "We often think of the Iranians as very strategic thinkers, playing the long game. No, no. It's different. They're ditherers," he says. "We ascribe to them too much competence. I do not consider what's happening now to be the result of great strategic thinking." He points to a "dogmatic ideology and a grievance culture, whereby they've taken a hit for their nuclear program and can't back down." In his assessment, by sheer stubbornness, the regime "basically decided to declare war on the U.S."

The failure to see that, and so much else, can be attributed to the prevailing "Washington-centered analysis," Mr. Ansari says. "We always see Iran as almost marginal to the problem, which is Washington." If only Mr. Trump hadn't done this or that, the commentators rage. But if there is now an opening for regime change, it is because U.S. policymakers for once were able to turn from the mirror and see what the Iranian people know well: The problem is in Iran.

*Mr. Kaufman is a member of the Journal's editorial board and a co-author of "In the War Room: The Inside Story of Israel's Fight Against Hamas and the Iranian Axis," forthcoming in September.*

## When Intel Came to Town to Build a Chip Factory



CROSS COUNTRY  
By Jack Butler

**New Albany, Ohio** The future is late in coming to this Columbus suburb. "For sale" and "now hiring" signs and construction were all in evidence when I visited late last year. Cranes hovered above half-finished buildings, near farmland and houses bearing Ohio State flags. Intel selected New Albany for a large semiconductor facility that was supposed to begin making chips by 2025. But Ohio One, as the project is known, has faced repeated delays. Completion now isn't expected until the early 2030s. "I'd be lying if I didn't say I was a little disappointed," Mayor Sloan Spalding said.

Local officials remain confident the project will come to fruition, but its struggles show that public-private partnerships, however welcome, can't be insulated from market forces and politics.

State actors from economic-development groups to Gov. Mike DeWine worked to secure Ohio One. The state gave \$2 billion in "public incentives," according to U.S. Sen. Bernie Moreno, who in September 2025 released a letter demanding Intel prove this "investment" wasn't a "charade" or even "potential fraud."

States compete to land such projects in what Greg Lawson, a senior research fellow at the free-market Buckeye Institute, has called an

"arms race." Gov. DeWine speaks in similar terms, saying, "I can't unilaterally disarm, and I'm damn well not gonna do it."

No one disputes chips are essential. They're in everything from consumer products to military hardware. For backers of Ohio One, they are too important for our supply ever to be

### New Albany, Ohio, was going to see an economic boom—then the market and politics interfered.

in doubt. "There are a lot of things that we don't make in America that we need to make in America. Chips are part of that," says U.S. Sen. Jon Husted. As lieutenant governor, Mr. Husted played a role in securing the Ohio One deal.

Ohio leaders backed Intel, but the market has favored Nvidia and other chip makers, who took the lead as Intel's stock fluctuated and its leadership changed.

There's "always gonna be those ups and downs," says Jason Hall, CEO of the Columbus Partnership, a nonprofit that promotes economic development in the region.

Ohio lawmakers expected a boon from the Chips and Science Act, which President Biden backed and signed. The 2022 law to improve domestic semiconductor capacity di-

rected billions at projects such as Ohio One. But Mr. Husted says the Biden administration dragged its feet in sending money Ohio's way. And the bill included requirements—such as one mandating child care—of little relevance to making chips.

"It was like urgency, urgency, urgency, and then bureaucracy, bureaucracy, bureaucracy," Mr. Husted says. And now the Trump administration has taken a stake in the company. It's "not ideal," Mr. Husted says, but it's preferable to the Biden administration's dithering.

Intel has invested about \$7 billion in Ohio One, generating construction jobs and spurring other industries. The question now is whether the lavishly funded project can do more than stoke a local economy for a couple of years.

Ohio's manufacturing sector has struggled recently. There was a "violent gutting of the core of our economy," says J.P. Nauseef, president of nonprofit JobsOhio. But there have been signs of economic life, especially around Columbus, the state capital, driven by the technology and defense industries.

Intel professes confidence. "Ohio One remains a critical component to Intel's long-term plans to advance U.S. technology and manufacturing leadership," the company said in a statement to the Journal. In a recent report submitted to the Ohio Department of Development, Intel's Jim Evers wrote that the project "remains part of our long-term plans for U.S. manufacturing."

Leaders such as Mr. DeWine share this optimism. "We're still very, very

happy we were able to get Intel here, and we think the future looks good," he said.

Given the sunk costs, it would be shocking for Ohio One to founder. "I don't wanna say 'too big to fail,'" Mr. Spalding says. "It's too important to fail."

That economic importance, the statewide buy-in and the national-security stakes do set the project apart. But Ohio One's travails argue for a stable and friendly business climate to attract investment instead of rolling "out the red carpet for any one particular business," as Mr. Lawson puts it. Red carpets won't protect even the most popular projects from political undulations and market uncertainty.

*Mr. Butler is deputy editor of WSJ.com's Free Expression newsletter.*

## Notable & Quotable: Loud Kids in Church

*From a notice posted to Facebook on Feb. 25 (and credited to Mississippi's First Baptist Union) by the Mount Washington United Brethren in Christ, a church in York, Pa.:*

Mt. Washington Church Official Release  
Notification of Policy Change  
Re: Loud Kid Policy

Effective Immediately

At Mt. Washington Church, we

are committed to transparency and accountability in all matters of church life. The following document outlines our comprehensive procedures regarding loud children in worship. Please consider this your official notice of policy clarification.

Effective immediately, if a family is considering visiting Mt. Washington Church and they have a loud kid, the following options are available:

Option 1. The family should bring the kid.

Option 2. The family should make sure they bring the kid.

Option 3. The family is to see that the child is brought to church.

Option 4. The kid is absolutely welcome and expected.

We believe the sound of children in worship is not a distraction. It is evidence of life, growth, and the future of the church.

If your child makes noise, you are not bothering us. You are blessing us.

Policy enacted. No exceptions.

## OPINION

## REVIEW &amp; OUTLOOK

## A Friday Economic Panic Attack

Washington's pessimist caucus is always on duty and the members had a good Friday, as oil prices climbed and the Labor Department said the economy lost jobs in February. Equities fell again on the bad news, but none of this is a cause for a panic attack.

There's no denying the February report was lousy. The U.S. shed 92,000 jobs and revised down gains for January and December by a combined 69,000. The question is what to make of the declines.

The first point to understand is that the jobs report is unrelated to the Iran war, though Democrats want to link the two. The Labor household and employer surveys took place mid-month before the bombing began.

Some 28,000 of the job losses came in healthcare, but that owes largely to union labor actions. Other industries that shed jobs include leisure and hospitality (27,000), manufacturing (12,000), construction (11,000) and motion picture production (9,500). The monthly job data has been noisy lately, and the household survey was less gloomy.

That survey showed the number of workers employed part-time for economic reasons declined by some one million over the past two months, and the unemployment rate has remained more or less steady at 4.4%—around what it was in 2017. The ADP payroll report and the Institute for Supply Management's services report this week both showed job growth last month, so go figure.

The labor market has been cooling, with healthcare and social assistance driving most gains. The causes are diffuse. Job growth notably stalled after President Trump began his tariff barrage last April, which created economic uncertainty and raised business costs. His immigration raids have reduced the supply of workers, especially in construction.

Many employers say that an aging population and skills gaps make it hard to find work-

ers in the trades. Rising productivity—2.8% in the last year—may also mean employers need fewer workers and could explain why wage growth has remained strong despite a slowdown in hiring. Average hourly wages rose 0.4% last month and are up 3.8% in the past year.

As for the other cause of Friday's anxiety, crude oil prices took a big jump to above \$93 a barrel. The cause is shipping disruptions through the Strait of Hormuz from the fighting in the Persian Gulf region. Kuwait said that it may have to throttle production as its oil storage facilities fill up, and other producers may also do so temporarily. Qatar, which wants the war to end fast, fed the angst by saying prices could go to \$150 a barrel.

Prices will rise further the longer the conflict continues, and Americans will see higher gasoline prices at the pump for a while. But to put current prices in non-panicky perspective, Brent crude traded above \$90 a barrel for most of 2022 after Russia's Ukraine invasion and exceeded \$100 a barrel from 2011 to 2014. Neither price surge led to a recession.

Prices will come down assuming shipping bottlenecks ease. The threat level in the Persian Gulf has already declined somewhat with fewer Iranian missile and drone attacks, and Mr. Trump has said the U.S. Navy will escort oil tankers if necessary.

Stopping the flow of oil is part of the Iran regime's war strategy to cause enough political pain in the Gulf and the U.S. that Mr. Trump and Israel stop the bombing. But that is all the more reason not to panic at a temporary price surge and press ahead to remove Iran's missile and drone stockpiles and assembly lines and the regime's brutal enforcers.

Oh, and if Mr. Trump wants a tax-cut boost for the economy while the war continues, he could call off his new 15% universal tariff. Consider it our contribution to easing everyone's economic anxiety.

### Are a bad jobs report and rising oil prices signals of trouble ahead?

## Andy Beshear's Moment of Choice

School choice shouldn't be partisan, but the teachers unions make sure it is. Republican lawmakers in Kentucky last week passed a bill to opt the state into the federal tax credit scholarship program—the only school choice opportunity for Bluegrass State children. Now Democratic Gov. Andy Beshear has a political choice to make.

Kentucky has no school choice program of its own. The state Supreme Court struck down a tax-credit scholarship law in 2022 and last month it killed a law allowing charter schools. In both cases the court cited a state constitutional ban on education funding outside of “common schools.”

The court's interpretation is highly debatable, but the new federal tax credit program avoids this thicket. Taxpayers can claim federal credits for donations to scholarship organizations, which can administer scholarships in states that opt in—at no state cost. The bill the Kentucky Legislature passed last week designates the secretary of state, who is Republican, to oversee participation in the program.

Kentucky lawmakers could override the Governor's veto with a simple majority. But Mr. Beshear, who has his eye on a run for the White House, could send a bipartisan signal of support for a popular cause. In a 2019 poll of Kentucky voters, 68% said they'd support a

federal tax credit for school choice.

But the Governor's rhetoric suggests the union has his ear. “Public dollars should only go to public schools,” he said last week. The bill has been on his desk since Monday.

The unions fear competition for public schools that are failing students. Kentucky students' performance on national test scores fell from 2013 to 2024 as per-pupil spending grew 51%, according to Edumomics Lab. School staffing has also grown even as enrollment has dropped.

Gov. Beshear can take a lesson from Democratic peers. Colorado Gov. Jared Polis in December said he'll opt in rather than leave “hundreds of millions of free federal dollars on the table,” as his office told us. Now three other Democrats who previously said they wouldn't opt in are having second thoughts, Education Week reported Wednesday. The offices of Hawaii Gov. Josh Green, Oregon Gov. Tina Kotek, and New Mexico Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham say they haven't made a final decision.

“I do not come from a wealthy family, and I was failed often in my own educational journey,” wrote Kentucky mother Akia McNeary in 2024. “Like any parent, I want to provide better for my children without having to pack up and move out of state.” Will Gov. Beshear show he's listening to parents like her?

### Will he listen to parents or unions on federal tax credit scholarships?

## Hezbollah Pays for Doing Iran's Bidding

The war with Iran is also being waged in Lebanon. While the Iranian regime's most dangerous capabilities are under attack at home, it's no surprise that its flagship foreign proxy, Hezbollah, chose to join the fight.

Hezbollah fired rockets and drones into Israel on Monday, which was a mistake for the weakened terrorist group. Israel has responded with air strikes and ordered civilians to evacuate Hezbollah's strongholds, including Beirut's Dahiyeh suburb and all of southern Lebanon below the Litani river.

“Do you think a single barrage justifies a war?” Naim Qassem, Hezbollah's leader, said. He had better get used to it, as Israel will no longer tolerate attacks on its citizens. Tehran, which orders the Lebanese to do and die, is in no position to come to their aid.

In strikes in Tehran and Beirut, Israel has killed Iran's Quds Force commander for Lebanon and his deputy. On Friday Israel bombed a joint Hezbollah-Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps command center. Hezbollah is fighting on, carrying out 100 more attacks since Monday, but Axios reports several dozen IRGC officers have fled Lebanon. An Israeli ground invasion of the country's south may be next.

Outraged at Hezbollah for starting another war on Iran's behalf, and under pressure to keep it from growing, Lebanon's government has made several splashy moves. On Monday Prime Minister Nawaf Salam's cabinet outlawed Hezbollah military activity. On Thursday it took some measures to “prevent any activity by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard in Lebanon.”

What took so long? The answer is Iranian power, which has neutered Lebanon's govern-

ment for years. Beirut dithered away all of 2025 while U.S. envoy Tom Barrack pleaded with it to disarm Hezbollah. The government's Jan. 8 claim to have already done so in southern Lebanon was dubious, and it has been debunked by Hezbollah's activity this week. Now Lebanon's citizens will suffer from its failure to act.

After trying everything else, the Trump Administration came around in late 2025 to encouraging Israel itself to disarm Hezbollah. That remains beyond Israel's grasp, but it can weaken the group and clear out a buffer zone to push the terrorists out of range with their thousands of shorter-range missiles.

French President Emmanuel Macron has intervened in an attempt to restrain Israel, but Hezbollah isn't cooperating. Mr. Qassem, its leader, said Wednesday that Hezbollah will retain its arms and keep fighting Israel. Lebanon's Justice Minister has called on Hezbollah to “take the initiative and surrender its arms,” but it is fighting for Iran, not Lebanon.

Iran created Hezbollah in the early 1980s to export the Islamic Revolution, and it has since used the militia to kill Americans, attack Israel, dominate Lebanon, and commit mass murder to preserve Iranian power over Syria for as long it could. Hezbollah has been Iran's most effective weapon, and it stands to lose the most if the regime falls.

The fewer options Iran has to terrorize the region, the better. As Iranian missile and drone salvos diminish, its proxies will suffer a similar fate if they try to pick up the slack. Hezbollah's entry into the war, with disregard for the Lebanese people, is another reminder of the terror and destruction Iran's regime has spread.

### Proxies that join the war make themselves legitimate targets.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## Elbridge Colby's Warnings Are Coming True

Your editorial (“Is the U.S. Running Out of Ammo?” March 4) downplays concerns about dwindling munitions in the Middle East. There “are enough for the Iran fight” you write and, if there truly is an emergency, President Trump can ask Congress for a bigger defense budget.

Exactly one year earlier (“The Debate Over Elbridge Colby,” March 4, 2025) you criticized now Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Elbridge Colby on grounds that his concerns about America's multifront dilemma were a fig leaf for isolationism. In a subsequent editorial (“Trump Stiffs Ukraine on Arms,” July 3, 2025), you castigated Mr. Colby for denying an arms delivery to Ukraine on the logic that with “Iran weakened militarily, there isn't a more urgent need for more Patriots anywhere else in the world than in Ukraine.”

It turns out there was, in fact, a more urgent need right around the corner. Munitions used in Ukraine aren't available in the Middle East—and those currently being used will not be available in East Asia.

In other words: Mr. Colby was right all along. For several years, he has been a persistent and often lonely voice calling for America to

get serious about the simultaneity problem. He foresaw the current predicament long before most others did, and he had the courage to confront it long before it was politically convenient to do so.

It simply won't do to keep saying we have enough muscle for each new crisis, and to tar those who buck establishment wisdom with tired labels. It's also not enough to call for more defense spending. Even if we take draconian steps now (as Mr. Trump is doing), they will take time to bear fruit. And we will have to figure out how to sustain them at a moment when the U.S. debt is already at World War II levels.

In the meantime, we need realistic strategies for coping with simultaneity. That's what the 2026 National Defense Strategy, of which Mr. Colby was a principal author, provides by emphasizing allied burden shifting and national mobilization.

A. WESS MITCHELL  
Keswick, Va.

*Mr. Mitchell served as assistant secretary of state for Europe and Eurasia in the first Trump administration. He co-founded the Marathon Institute with Mr. Colby, a think tank dedicated to the study of great-power competition.*

## The National Academy of Sciences Isn't Biased

“A Climate Manual Bait and Switch” (Review & Outlook, March 3) inaccurately describes a chapter on climate science in our Reference Manual on Scientific Evidence as biased. In fact, it was developed under rigorous procedures of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine to ensure that the chapter, like all chapters in the manual, reflects the best available scientific evidence.

The draft chapter was reviewed by an oversight committee that included judges and scientists and was further evaluated by a different group of judges and scientists serving as anonymous, expert peer reviewers. The chapter on climate science is consistent with the current scientific understanding reflected in the broader

peer-reviewed scientific literature. As with all National Academies reports, the Reference Manual was written independently from its sponsors.

At the National Academies, nonpartisanship is fundamental to our mission. We believe decision-making, including by judges, is best served by clear explanations of the relevant science. As noted in its foreword, the Reference Manual provides a dispassionate guide for judges who may need help understanding the background science in cases where science and law intersect. For that reason, the chapter on climate science remains available on our website.

MARCIA MCNUTT  
President, National Academy of Sciences  
Washington

## Our Trade With China Has Helped Americans

In his review of “Red Dawn Over China,” (“A Maoist Myth Debunked,” Books, Feb. 14), Tunku Varadarajan asserts that China's admission to the World Trade Organization in 2001 had “devastating consequences for every economy except China's own. (Thank you, Bill Clinton.)” The facts say otherwise.

It's true that the U.S. economy shed a net five million manufacturing jobs in the years that followed, but even the “China shock” analysis attributes

### ‘The Science Guy’ and Facts

Bill Nye “The Science Guy” invokes everything except science in his criticism of the Environmental Protection Agency's rescission of its 2009 finding that greenhouse-gas emissions endanger public health (“The EPA Is Wrong About Greenhouse Gases,” Letters, Feb. 25).

Contrary to the EPA 2009 predictions: There has been a decline in smog levels from 1980 to 2024. There has been no trend in hurricane numbers or intensities since 1973. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change finds no change in global flooding. There has been no trend in the EPA heat wave index since 1895, except for the 1930s. Several studies show a decline in net mortality from heat and cold. U.S. wildfires have declined sharply since 1926, and global wildfire acreage declined 24% between 1998 and 2015. Global droughts have declined about 0.5% per decade since 1950. Global per capita food production has increased 40% since 1980. And the latest peer-reviewed research reports no acceleration globally in sea-level rise. The Science Guy's argument is fact-free.

BENJAMIN ZYCHER  
Senior fellow, American Enterprise  
Institute  
Long Beach, Wash.

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### Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



P. PAINES.

“I'd have sworn he said rain.”

## OPINION

## There's Reason to Worry About the Iran War



DECLARATIONS  
By Peggy Noonan

Thoughts on Iran have to begin with the awe we feel, again, for the U.S. military. Its professionalism, cool and courage are impressive and inspiring. And we must give Donald Trump his due: His decision was bold, he took a big swing.

The end of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and scores of his colleagues-in-hellish-rule isn't bad news for the world but good, as is what looks to be inevitable damage to or even possible ending of its nuclear program.

You've got to hope it's all going to succeed, that it will make America's position an inch or two better in the world and not an inch or two worse, that a violent regime will be replaced by something better, safer.

**The action was bold, but we can't know what the repercussions will be, and a lot could go wrong.**

But it's a gamble, a huge one, and we'll find out if it was a reckless one.

Of course it is a war. We are bombing a sovereign nation and have killed its leaders; we've sunk much of the Iranian fleet. This isn't a situation that lends itself to phrases like "limited series of strikes." Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth has said it could go three weeks, maybe eight. You don't know when you launch something like this how and when it ends.

(Quickly, on Mr. Hegseth. Someone has to calm him down. He's supposed to be trying to get the world to see the wisdom of the administra-

tion's actions. Instead he's something between an excitable morning TV anchor and the rooster who thought he brought the dawn. "We're playing for keeps." "We're punching them while they're down." He brags about our "lethality." Stop talking like that! Don't feed the stereotypes, don't tempt the gods.)

Should Congress debate the war seriously and at length? Yes, of course. That's its job. We are a republic. Stick with it, with its forms, delineations and responsibilities. "Half of Congress is useless." Half of Congress is always useless, but it's what we've got.

The argument for the war is serious: For almost half a century, Iran's government has been causing violent trouble in the world. It has been increasing its production of weaponry, it has long vowed death to America and Israel, and, after the June bombing of its nuclear installations and the crushing of December and January's street protests, it is seriously weakened. So move.

Mr. Trump first won the presidency with fiery denunciations of illegal immigration and forever wars. He doesn't like war but he looks to have grown to like sparks, and he's had a lot of recent good fortune with the use of force. When he first bombed Iran, that country did little in response; when he moved on Venezuela, plucking its ruler from his bed, there was no blowback. It's possible this has left him thinking the world's bad guys are a Potemkin village, that they talk big but fold quickly. But is that true?

He is gambling when he thinks he's on a winning streak. Iran's government ducked and covered through the June bombings, but now they will be fighting to keep from losing everything. It's hard to imagine the regime's death throes, if it comes to that, will be pretty.



Trump, Secretary of State Marco Rubio and chief of staff Susie Wiles Feb. 28.

It isn't fear-mongering to think about potentially harrowing repercussions to the U.S. actions, which could include a widening war in the Mideast, a broadening and escalation of hostilities, the dragging in of U.S. allies, a drain on our armaments becoming a provocation to potential adversaries, a terrorist strike or strikes from Iranian operatives or nonstate actors, oil spikes, an energy shock—20% of the world's oil goes through the Strait of Hormuz. Many in the military services, and possibly civilians, may be casualties.

Here is what I infer of the president's logic. The bombing has a good chance of slowing or stopping Iran's nuclear, ballistic-missile and drone programs. It will certainly degrade and damage Iran's infrastructure, standing, mystique. The country will be diminished. If its leaders are killed, so be it. If those who replace them are better, good. If they are just as bad or worse, at least they will be operating in reduced circumstances. They'll be forced to turn to rebuilding their country. They might therefore be diverted from arms-making, at least for a while. And if,

down the road, they act up in harmful ways, they will know in the back of their minds that the U.S. may move on them again. This may moderate their actions and decisions.

I infer because Mr. Trump has given many reasons for his decisions. This is not reassuring. He's offered varying explanations for going forward—he had a feeling, or Israel was going to move anyway—and in the end whatever happens is what he'll say he wanted. If there's regime change, that was his intention all along. If there isn't, it wasn't what he was looking for.

The hope for an armed uprising by the Iranian people strikes me as absurd. They don't have arms. They live in a police state. The ayatollahs have operated with Mao's understanding that power comes out of the barrel of a gun. The Journal reports that Israel targeted not only Iranian missile and drone sites but the nation's police-state apparatus, including the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps headquarters in Tehran, in hope of clearing the way for a popular revolt.

Could that happen? People who

have lived under a dictatorship for almost half a century are forced to survive and rise within a sick system. Those most likely to oppose the religio-fascist state that oppressed them would likely lack the street fervor of street Islamists. When your country is being bombed and your cousin's neighborhood hit, the impulse is to defend your land and shake your fist at the bombers.

U.S. polls so far aren't supportive of the president's decision. What might be behind the reservations? The administration's communication of its thinking could, it's true, be substantially improved. Formal, detailed explanations of official thinking are needed in situations like this, but they aren't magic. George W. Bush's addresses on the decision to go into Iraq were regular and substantive, but they couldn't make that war succeed.

No one outside Iran likes its regime. Most Americans would believe it is a danger to us, that it wishes us ill, that it has thrived on terror and oppression. The government of the mullahs has no serious constituency here. But after Afghanistan and Iraq, people think America is snakebit in the Mideast, that nothing dramatic will likely work. Small, incremental moves might help, in the diplomatic day to day. But moving militarily on a Mideast country? No, we're snakebit.

If I were in Congress, would I vote right now to support the administration's action in Iran? I think not, due to the severity of some of the possible repercussions outlined above.

It is possible that thinking is unimaginative, too dead to the urgency of the moment. The fact is you only know on something like this in retrospect. Right now we're waiting for the "in retrospect" to occur. That is an uncomfortable place to be in.

Write to [peggy@wsj.com](mailto:peggy@wsj.com).

## Germany's AfD Ditches Trump Over Iran

By Filipp Piatov

Berlin

The far-right Alternative for Germany party has long styled itself the Trump administration's closest partner in Germany, and members of the administration, especially Vice President JD Vance, have spoken supportively of the AfD. But at the first real stress test, the party abandoned President Trump. It condemned the U.S. military strikes against the Iranian regime.

"Donald Trump started as a president of peace," Tino Chrupalla, an AfD co-chairman, said. "In the end, Donald Trump will end as a president of war." Those are strong words from a man who declined to criticize Russian dictator Vladimir Putin for his war against Ukraine and threats against Germany. "He hasn't done anything to me," Mr. Chrupalla said of Mr. Putin in November.

In an official statement, the party leadership declared it was watching the U.S. and Israeli strikes "with great concern" and added: "The renewed destabilization of the Middle East is not in the German interest and must be brought to an end."

The AfD leadership failed to mention that the regime in Tehran has destabilized the region for decades by directing terrorist organizations in Lebanon, Yemen and Iraq, supporting Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad during the civil war, and contributing to a massive wave of refugees into Europe. The party's first official statement didn't contain a single critical word about the Islamist regime itself, which has secretly pursued a nuclear-weapons program and has carried out terrorist attacks on German soil.

Meanwhile, the center-right Christian Democratic Chancellor Friedrich Merz, frequently smeared by the AfD as anti-Trump, stood firmly behind the U.S. He made clear that he regards the Islamic Republic as a "terrorist regime" and that he shares the objectives of Germany's allies.

Mr. Merz delivered the most remarkable foreign-policy sentence ever spoken by a postwar German

leader: "Legal classifications under international law will achieve relatively little—especially when they largely remain without consequences." The comment is a jolt of realism for German elites, who, more than 80 years after World War II, generally treat international law as sacrosanct.

For his support of the American president, the AfD accused Mr. Merz of "pathetic submission" and derided him as a "U.S. vassal."

This episode demonstrates that the Trump administration misjudged the AfD in treating it as its principal ally in Germany and as similar to other European populist movements of the right. There are parallels between the MAGA movement and the AfD, particularly in their calls for restrictions on immigration and the disdain with which the political and media establishment treats them. But what MAGA appears to have misunderstood most about the AfD is the core of every German far-right movement: its intractable anti-Americanism.

German nationalists have never

fully forgiven America for World War II. Nor for the cultural competition, from hamburgers' supplanting bratwurst to the omnipresence of American films and music. The most radical far-right activists claim that Germany remains occupied by the U.S. and therefore isn't a sovereign

**Anti-Americanism is in the far-right party's DNA. The idea of an alignment with MAGA was folly.**

state. While German nationalists often seek alliances with European partners, American patriots are for them fundamentally incompatible allies. The very concept of the U.S.—a nation that opens itself to people from around the world—is irreconcilable with far-right German blood-and-soil ideology.

For that reason, parts of the AfD viewed with deep skepticism the alliance pursued by party co-chairman

Alice Weidel and some of her followers. They understood the deeply rooted hostility toward America within much of the party's electorate, which tends to be sympathetic to Russia and China.

When Ms. Weidel openly aligned herself with Elon Musk during Germany's 2025 federal election campaign, was received by Mr. Vance in Munich, and sent party representatives to Washington, it seemed clear the AfD was never seeking a partnership of like-minded actors. Its American connections were likely intended only to deter German authorities from banning the party, which is already locked out of any parliamentary coalition.

In 2025, the influential AfD Bundestag member Maximilian Krah said in a podcast that the federal government was facing "foreign-policy pressure from the Americans." He said Germany's leaders were "scared of the U.S., because their entire intelligence cooperation depends on the Americans." In Mr. Krah's conception, the AfD should leverage this pressure to blackmail the German

state into refraining from action against the party.

The AfD has its own issues with intelligence cooperation. Ms. Weidel acknowledged in an interview that she regularly visited the Chinese ambassador in Berlin at his private residence. She said she wanted to hear China's views on the war in Ukraine. Last year a former aide to Mr. Krah was convicted of spying for China. After the aide's arrest in 2024, Mr. Krah fired him and denied any wrongdoing on his own part.

The AfD won't abandon its strategy of using the U.S. as a domestic political shield. It will continue sending representatives to the U.S. and delivering pro-American, fraternal speeches in Washington, when German voters aren't listening. But this week revealed how the party truly thinks. At the decisive moment, it positioned itself unmistakably against Mr. Trump—and against America.

Mr. Piatov is deputy head of the politics department at *Bild*, a German newspaper.

## The Trump Revolution Faces an Iran Test



BUSINESS  
WORLD  
By Holman W.  
Jenkins, Jr.

wave of devastating attacks it's unleashing on the Islamic Republic? The answer is probably yes, Iran will give Mr. Trump an out. But it's an ironic situation to be in.

When it's over, this or some other regime will exist on Iranian territory and will need to give U.S. access to monitor its bomb, drone and ballistic-missile programs. That is, unless the U.S. goal is pure military punish-

ment from a distance—which the U.S. and Israeli military can do with amazing facility.

Fortune favors the bold but not always, and without a fairly good outcome, regime change may yet come to Washington at the hands of next year's Congress.

It's a moment of wonder and reflection for me. Rolled out almost 10 years ago was my vision of a then-unlikely first Trump presidency—a crockery-breaking, chaotic demystification of America's highest office, a conflicted administration constantly walking back the president's un-schooled statements, not getting cooperation from Congress, etc.

That was May 2016, with the GOP primaries still undecided. I didn't anticipate then the war that the U.S. intelligence agencies would wage against his unexpected presidency, though I figured it out.

What a difference a decade makes. But then why wouldn't Mr. Trump (or anyone) be transformed by those 10 years, the fruit of which we're now struggling to contemplate—the Iran war he sprang on the country overnight.

I'm guessing Mr. Trump gamed it all out in some fashion. He had to know he was disturbing a status quo already being the right direction: an Iranian regime hated by its people, its strategic assets disrupted by last June's bombings, its aged leader at death's door, a succession crisis looming, its neighbors aligned in favor of containment.

Scholarly have long dismissed the hack analysis that George W. Bush was driven by Oedipal issues or Halliburton. We might wish we had a

paper trail to what Mr. Trump was really thinking, if he fully knows himself. One thing we might be spared is a fillip to U.S. antisemitism from blaming any bad potential outcome on "the Jews."

Presidents frequently resort to foreign affairs when their domestic position weakens, but a different flavor also emerges here—of Mr. Trump getting down to the real business that has been noisily on his mind for 40 years.

His administration just retooled NASA's Artemis mission set, which it previously wanted to reduce, to grab the strategic high ground on and

**Time for the professionals if the U.S. foreign policy redirection is to become a lasting legacy.**

near the moon. He refocused U.S. policy on genuine strategic industries—i.e., not solar panels and green cars but AI, critical minerals and shipbuilding.

Think Greenland. Think the reordering of NATO. Think the continuous deployment, which might strain the USS Abraham Lincoln, of Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner, his closest aides.

The central challenge is China. After last year's trade-war miscues, Mr. Trump seems to have converged on a policy of simultaneous detente and deterrence. As he was making his Iran decision, didn't he know his own schedule? Of course he did. He

has four meetings coming up with Xi Jinping, the first on March 31. I doubt he lost track of this fact—or failed to think about how close the bombs should be allowed to fall near 73 Movahed Danesh Avenue, where China's Tehran embassy is located.

As I was writing these words came the expulsion of Kristi Noem. Good. If the Trump revolution is to be professionalized, if it's to become a new establishment, if it's to survive a messy Iran outcome, it needs more figures of independent stature like the many-hatted Marco Rubio, the Joint Chiefs' Gen. Dan Caine or Mr. Trump's all-important U.S. attorney for the Southern District of New York, Jay Clayton.

After Wednesday's column, readers emailed to straighten me out. President Trump had launched his war on Iran because it was a "good" thing to do. The U.S. was already at war with Iran, had always been at war with Iran. Iran was a bad actor.

Thanks for clarifying. Here I thought he might have considered multiple courses of action, weighed pros and cons, gamed out costs and benefits. But, er, if he didn't game it out, how did he know it would be good?

The U.S. still has bigger fish to fry than Iran. But I also realize that certain readers can't let a sentence or word pass without categorizing it as pro-Trump or anti-Trump.

I often wonder: Does their categorizing need extend to the subatomic realm? Are there pro-Trump and anti-Trump quarks?

For me, though, words and ideas can also have wider uses and functions.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

PUBLISHED SINCE 1889 BY DOW JONES & COMPANY

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# A turbulent week for financial markets

## Investors risk being too complacent about war in the Middle East

It has been a rough week in markets, even for investors getting used to frequent whiplash under US President Donald Trump's second administration. Nevertheless, beyond the tragedies of death and destruction from his and Israel's war against Iran, and Tehran's reckless retaliation, the potential magnitude of the conflict's economic impact raises the question of whether markets are reacting anywhere near enough.

In many previous geopolitical crises oil price shocks have been the harbingers of widespread global economic damage. Brent, the international oil benchmark, broke past \$90 per barrel yesterday, up from about \$70 before the war began last weekend. In Europe natural gas prices nearly doubled, and power prices are gyrating wildly,

as newly expensive gas alternates with lower-priced renewables in the energy mix.

Stocks have taken a hit, and bond markets, where yields have jumped, signal inflation fears. And yet: stock prices remain not far off where they were at the start of the year in most advanced markets. Traditional haven assets, from Swiss francs to gold, do not suggest any sudden rush of fear. Why the quiescence? Geopolitical analysts may warn investors against complacency. So far the warnings have been mostly shrugged off.

Those ringing alarm bells could still be right. The conflict in the Middle East is already metastasising more than most had thought. The longer it goes on, the greater the disruption to vital global supply chains. Indeed, Trump's ambition for regime change in Iran might point to long-term disruption in the fossil fuel-rich region, rather than the few weeks many are pricing for.

One explanation for the calm may be

that investors are numbed, or stupefied, by what would once be extraordinary events. They may have also internalised expectations of Taco – Trump always chickens out (if markets sink) – to the extent that "markets will be fine" has become a self-fulfilling prophecy. But right now, it is not at all obvious how Trump could put the war genie back in the bottle if the market reaction becomes too negative.

The oil price channel from conflict to economic turmoil is also not what it used to be. The US shale revolution means there is more supply to help keep a lid on global prices. And advanced economies are much less oil-intensive than during the oil shocks of the 1970s.

Market reactions may also reflect that while the US is causing mayhem elsewhere, its own economic heartland could be fine. Because of shale, a rising oil price is now a positive terms of trade shock for the US. Natural gas, too, is in ample domestic supply for North American customers, unlike Asian ones

**This conflict is already metastasising more than most had thought and the longer it goes on, the greater the disruption to vital global supply chains**

who rely more heavily on shipments through the Strait of Hormuz. With US financial markets still dominating money flows around the world, the insulation of its domestic economy may shore up markets globally.

What could puncture this confidence? First, a prolonged and intensifying conflict in the Middle East. Next, a more serious economic fallout at home. Yesterday, in another sign of a weakening labour market, we learnt the US economy shed 92,000 jobs in February. And though America may well be a net exporter of energy, the global oil price still feeds through to the petrol pump. This complicates matters for the US Federal Reserve. Finally, AI optimism, which has underpinned the strength of the US stock market, continues to look shaky.

With fresh uncertainty building, caution would be a wise move for investors. Some may be tempted to buy the dip. But the conflict and its economic ramifications are still playing out.

## Opinion Society

# America rethinks how to train its workforce

FT montage/Getty Images



Oren Cass



At Hadrian, an advanced manufacturer of aerospace and defence components in California, technicians are hired without prior experience. And they begin their careers reporting directly to members of a workforce development team whose experience may be in the military or the fast-food sector.

Two hundred miles up the road, Fresno Unified, California's third-largest public school district, helped 12,000 students earn 32,000 industry certifications last year on 81 different career pathways. These provide not only technical training and work-based learning (in partnership with local businesses) but also a focus on soft skills and employability, leadership skills and social and emotional learning.

From high schools and community colleges to factory floors and union halls, all the way up to corporate

ates twice as fast as its labour market added jobs that require a college degree. Now, the unemployment rate for college grads equals the level reached in the depths of the so-called Great Recession. For the first time since the 1970s, the unemployment rate for bachelor's degree holders is higher than for occupational degree holders. Ask parents whether they would rather have their child receive a full scholarship to whatever college they can get into or enter a three-year apprenticeship leading to a good job, and most will choose the latter.

The second key trend is that the supposedly inevitable migration of economic opportunity from the physical world to the "knowledge economy" has suddenly reversed course. As the increasing capabilities of artificial intelligence threaten the value of white-collar symbol manipulators, its insatiable appetite for energy and infrastructure has left the world's largest technology and finance companies scrambling for electricians and pipe fitters. In parallel, the bipartisan commitment to rebuild the nation's industrial base is creating demand for technicians and machinists in places seen as "left behind".

Micron Technology illustrates both: it is expanding production for the high-bandwidth memory needed by data centres as quickly as it can, supported by billions of dollars in federal funding. Its \$100bn project in upstate New York is counting on partnerships with the local building trade unions to staff the massive construction effort and on apprenticeship programmes to prepare workers to make chips. Google, meanwhile, has begun funding the electrical training Alliance, a partnership between the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers and the National Electrical Contractors Association.

These are not federal jobs programmes. They are efforts by the appropriate institutions throughout the nation – schools, employers, unions – to reclaim their role helping people develop the skills and values to build decent lives. In some cases, federal and state governments are not involved at all. In others, they provide frameworks and funding to support local organisations whose own success depends on career achievement for people in their communities.

A "skills gap" or a "labour shortage" is not some blight on the free-enterprise system that someone else will fix. It is a natural condition for which free enterprise is itself the solution. The losers will be those who continue to whine. The winners will be those who get to work.

The writer is an FT contributing editor, chief economist at American Compass and writes the *Understanding America* newsletter

## Letters

# The reasoning behind the ICJ's Chagos ruling is 'very thin'

Henry Mance ("The islands at the end of empire", The Weekend Essay, Life & Arts, February 28) seems to take it as a given that separating the Chagos Islands from Mauritius in 1965 was contrary to international law. This is extremely questionable.

In 2019, the International Court of Justice issued an advisory opinion that the Chagos Islands should not have been separated from Mauritius and ought to be returned to it. The ICJ is a distinguished court whose advisory rulings on international law are entitled to an appropriate measure of respect, but they are advisory, not binding. The force of an advisory

judgment as a statement of international law depends entirely on the quality of its reasoning, which in this case is very thin.

The islands are geographically and ethnically distinct from Mauritius. They are 1,300 miles away. Their tiny population did not come from Mauritius.

They are mostly descended from slaves and indentured labourers imported in the early 19th century from Madagascar and Mozambique. Not all of them want to be Mauritians.

The only connection that there has ever been between the islands and Mauritius is that Britain once governed

both of them, and for reasons of convenience administered the islands from Port Louis, the capital of its nearest substantial colony. Against this background, the ICJ's suggestion that the Mauritians' right of self-determination means that they are entitled to own the Chagos Islands is highly artificial.

Customary international law depends on settled state practice accepted by the consensus of nations on the footing that it is legally binding. There has never been a consensus of nations that the boundaries of colonies and other dependencies are immutable, either generally or in

particular circumstances. On the contrary, colonies have frequently been amalgamated, separated and their boundaries modified for reasons of pure convenience, not just by Britain but by France, the US, the Netherlands, Australia and New Zealand among others.

I have no position on whether Britain should surrender the Chagos Islands to Mauritius, but the suggestion that international law requires it is misleading and gets in the way of rational analysis.

**Jonathan Sumption**  
Former Justice of the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom, London SE10, UK

## Documentary film-making – how the BBC could help

Jo Ellison's piece on the BBC's *Today* programme (Life & Arts, February 28) quotes a documentary maker who says "the genre is facing an extinction crisis" – which Ellison attributes to "our cultural leaders... being neutered by a system too scared to air controversial, sensitive points of view". I think the picture is a bit more nuanced than this.

Last year more than a hundred documentaries were released in British cinemas – many dealing with the themes of social justice and human rights to which Ellison referred. But most of these films were made outside the standard television commissioning model by independent filmmakers – one of the most entrepreneurial sectors of the industry.

Funding films like these and getting them seen by audiences is a struggle, but things would be improved if the leading public service broadcaster in the UK were more flexible in its attitude to funding and distribution, if some of the unlimited digital capacity were devoted to independent film, and if the government provided incentives (similar, perhaps, to the UK's Seed Enterprise Investment Scheme that boosts early-stage start-ups) for those individuals and organisations who wanted to fund documentary films.

This would help a sector of cultural and socio-economic importance: it is one of the "easiest to access" parts of the film industry, where many people start their careers.

**Christopher Hird**  
Founder, Dartmouth Films; former chair, Sheffield DocFest, London NW5, UK

## Behind the enduring appeal of the Emin bed

Jackie Wullschläger's review of *Tracey Emin: A Second Life* (Life & Arts, February 28) captures how differently the installation *My Bed* reads today from its original reception. What once seemed scandalous now appears closer to what it always was: a portrait of depression and vulnerability.

Read alongside Izabella Scott's FT Magazine piece on the literary bed trick, the work acquires another layer (February 28). Scott reminds us that beds in literature have long been spaces where identity and narrative become uncertain. Emin's installation performs a similar transformation, exposing the most private of spaces to public interpretation.

Perhaps that explains its endurance. The bedroom may be private, but once placed in a gallery it becomes a stage for collective storytelling.

**Joanne Carter**  
Editor, *TheAppWhisperer.com*, Harpenden, Hertfordshire, UK



Tracey Emin's 'My Bed' is the centrepiece of a Tate retrospective – Alamy

## 'Turandot' in Toronto? I'd wrap up warmer

Canadians need something to smile about these days. We worry about international politics, the worst winter in decades, and the thought that a mouse living next door to a lion does well to lie low. It was, therefore, cheering to read Carola Long's article on coats (Life & Arts, February 7).

In a world where "it simply does not cut it for a cool young woman to run out of the house in a puffer and a baseball hat", Long advocates alternatives. These include above-the-knee opera coats or the faux fur-trimmed outfit worn by Rama Duwaji, wife of New York Mayor Zohran Mamdani at his inauguration.

Long is also not averse to cherry blossom-printed silk, or to something upcycled from a Victorian bedspread.

Earlier this year, after three winter storms in less than two weeks, daily frostbite warnings, and wind chill as low as minus 33C, I walked through a blizzard to an early morning dental appointment in downtown Toronto. It had snowed all the previous day and overnight. I waded through drifts well above my knees and at every junction climbed over metre-high mounds piled up by snowploughs that, quite rightly, had prioritised streets over sidewalks. I wore my warm, lightweight, waterproof, below-the-knee zipped puffer coat, its hood drawn tight over my beanie.

When I go to *Turandot*, when my husband is elected mayor of New York, or when climate change makes Toronto the new Marrakech, I'll think about throwing silk and bedspreads over my shoulders. Meanwhile, it's nice to have a good laugh.

**Gillian Fenwick**  
Toronto, ON, Canada

## Google Maps review that was a bit close to home

Intrigued by the premise of Pep Torres' piece "The quiet catastrophe in your pocket", in which the Spanish inventor describes "three trivial, almost invisible inventions that are quietly dismantling our humanity" (Life & Arts, FT Weekend, February 14), I found my curiosity steadily growing as I read, peaking when he turned to the evils of customer ratings and reviews on Google Maps.

As someone who finds such reviews an invaluable aid, I wondered what had sharpened this particular axe.

My curiosity led me to the Google Maps reviews of the Museum of Ideas and Inventions of Barcelona (MIBA), which Torres founded: they average a troubling 2.8.

Visitors' detailed accounts of their "sub-optimal experiences" of the inventor's museum make almost as intriguing reading as the Torres article itself.

**Gerard Clinton**  
Ballybay, County Monaghan, Ireland

## Alas for my talking tweeds

Clive Cookson's review of geneticist Adrian Woolfson's book *On the Future of Species: Authoring Life by Means of Artificial Biological Intelligence* (Books, Life & Arts, FT Weekend, February 28) raises the possibility of artificial "biological" intelligence.

This even suggests a future where "our clothing items may converse with us and hold opinions".

Alas! Too late for my favourite old tweed jacket, discarded by my ex-wife while I was away on business. If only it could have begged for its life.

**Nick Bradbury**  
Reading, Berkshire, UK

## Boring bivouacs and mountain mottos

We write as the co-founders of the architecture and design practice EX. – the firm behind the Corradini and Berrone bivouacs, which were two of the mountain shelters featured in your travel piece "Postcard from... the Alps" (Life & Arts, February 7).

In the piece, Ben Tibbetts, the photographer and mountain guide, addresses what has become a hot topic for mountaineers, cultural institutions and designers alike – namely, is it time Alpine architecture was a little more boring?

It is true that many architects have worked on mountain shelters in recent years, and some of these projects have attracted attention for their visual presence – at times drawing visitors who are not adequately prepared for the mountain environment, all of which is fuelling the problem of Alpine "overtourism", a trend amplified by social media. Still, we do not believe that the core problem lies in the idea that new bivouacs are "too beautiful". In our view, the debate would benefit from addressing the deeper and more structural issues: the need for proper planning, including a clear survey of existing bivouacs across the Alps and a strategy to understand where new shelters may be useful, where they should be avoided, and where some might even need to be removed.

Architecture inevitably has a visual impact. In our most recent project, the Frattini Bivouac, we adopted a very lightweight structural approach – almost tent-like – using high-performance materials. This naturally led to a restrained formal language that embraces fragility and impermanence rather than monumentality.

The Frattini Bivouac was developed through a collaboration between GAMEC, the contemporary art museum in Bergamo, and the local Italian Alpine Club.

What mattered to us was that a cultural institution and a local Alpine community took shared responsibility for a specific place in the mountains, showing that even a small emergency structure can carry cultural meaning while remaining respectful and lightweight.

Perhaps the question, then, is not whether Alpine architecture should be more "boring", but how carefully and consciously it engages with landscape, risk and responsibility. As in mountaineering itself, the approach matters. As Yvon Chouinard, the environmentalist and founder of outdoor clothing and sporting goods company Patagonia once wrote: "Remember the rock, the other climbers – climb clean."

**Andrea Cassi & Michele Versaci**  
EX., Turin, Italy

## Opinion

## Is the nightmare scenario for global energy here?

Daniel Yergin

The roots of the deepening crisis in the Gulf go all the way back to strikes by oil workers in Iran in the autumn of 1978 – an essential part of the protests that toppled the Shah just a few months later. The ensuing disruption of oil from one of the world's major suppliers set off panic in the global market. This was amplified by the consolidation of power by the Islamic republic, whose revolutionary zeal included unending enmity towards the west, particularly the US.

One legacy of all this has been the nightmare scenario of the oil that flows through the Gulf being interdicted by an extended and destructive war. The fear? That this will result in skyrocketing energy prices that send the world econ-

omy plummeting into a deep recession.

Ever since the war in Iran began a week ago, Tehran has done everything it can to turn this into reality. A key target is the Strait of Hormuz – one of the globe's central maritime chokepoints. About 20 per cent of the world's oil normally travels through this passage. But its importance is not limited to oil. Since 1997, the Gulf – principally Qatar – has become a major source of liquefied natural gas. Nearly 20 per cent of world LNG now also flows through these narrow waters.

On any given day, as many as 90 tankers could usually be seen sailing through the strait. Now there are virtually none. While insurance policies for shipping in the region remain active, very large war-risk premiums are being added. Several commercial vessels in the Gulf or just outside the Strait of Hormuz have been targeted with drones. The threat of attack by weaponised Iranian speed-boats remains.

The main markets for Gulf supplies used to be Europe and the US. But in

economic terms the Strait now points east, meaning the immediate crisis is focused on Asia. Last year, over 80 per cent of the oil and 90 per cent of LNG coming out of the Gulf went to Asia.

This does not mean that the current disruption is only an Asian problem. Global oil and gas markets are grappling with the crisis. As of Friday morning, the Brent crude oil benchmark was up about 50 per cent from where it was before the US military build-up began in the Gulf. Meanwhile Asian buyers deprived of Qatari cargoes are bidding up the price on the Asian spot market to pull mainly US cargoes away from Europe. Asian spot LNG prices have almost doubled since the war began and the European natural gas price is up about 50 per cent, which puts new pressure on Europe's economy.

Moreover, Europe and Africa depend on the Gulf for a substantial part of their jet fuel. The longer the war goes on, the more upward pressure on prices. Shortfalls in Asia will soon show up on gasoline pumps in North America.

Shipping through the Strait of Hormuz has stopped for now. But the most difficult scenario would be severe damage to infrastructure and a lengthy closure of the strait. That would fuel fears of longer-term supply shortfalls.

Yet this crisis is unfolding in a world in which the global oil and gas system is more resilient and diversified than it has

**This crisis is unfolding in a world in which oil and gas supplies are more diversified than previously**

been for decades. Iran was once one of the key oil suppliers to the world. No longer. Its exports, constrained by sanctions, amount to less than 2 per cent of global supplies, most of which go to China at discounted prices.

A similar change has taken place in Venezuela. Once a star of world oil and one of the founding members of Opec,

today it can hardly even be called a petrostate. It produces less oil than the US state of North Dakota and a quarter as much as neighbouring Brazil.

But the biggest change has occurred in the US. Less than two decades ago it was the world's largest importer of oil. Now it is the largest producer. Just ten years ago the US exported its very first cargo of LNG. Now it is the world's largest exporter of LNG.

Russia, though constrained by sanctions and price restrictions, remains a major exporter of oil. But America's new supplies proved critical when Vladimir Putin tried to use the "energy weapon" by cutting off natural gas supplies to Europe. He intended to inflict enough economic pain to shatter the coalition supporting Ukraine. The effort failed. One reason was that US LNG could replace substantial amounts of shuttered Russian gas. Overall, the shale revolution has brought a new stability to the global markets.

Resilience takes other forms as well. China has been pouring huge amounts

of oil into storage, which it can now draw on, and the countries that belong to the International Energy Agency all maintain strategic stocks. The disruption underlines the importance of energy security and how closely it is tied to national security.

There is strength on the ground as well. Gulf countries have long recognised that the strait is a major risk for them. Saudi Arabia has prudently built a network of pipelines running east to west from the Persian Gulf to the Red Sea. Abu Dhabi has built a smaller pipeline that runs parallel to the strait.

Current oil prices in the \$90s are far from the worst-case scenario. But right now, the world is looking at the biggest disruption in oil production in history as well as a resounding shock to global gas markets. The key question for global energy markets now is the duration of this explosive war.

*The writer, vice chair of S&P Global, is author of "The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money and Power"*



Ann Klemm

## Why Trump won't clean up his own mess

AMERICA

Gillian Tett



Four decades ago, Robert Fulghum, the American author and pastor, published a best-selling book entitled *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. This argued that the most potent life lessons could and should be learnt in pre-school, including the all-important dictum "clean up your own mess".

It is worth pondering afresh. In the 14 long months since Donald Trump began his second presidential term, his style has induced profound culture shock in erstwhile allies. Not only has he adopted a capricious, authoritarian style, he has also embraced geo-economics, as he battles for hegemonic power with China (which matters in Iran, given Beijing's influence there).

But there is another, less-discussed cultural tic that matters too: Trump does not even pretend he needs to clean up any "mess" he makes. Kindergarten rules do not apply.

Consider the Middle East. Shortly before the invasion of Iraq in 2003, US secretary of state Colin Powell famously warned his boss, President George W. Bush, that if "you break it, you own it".

This was later dubbed the "Pottery Barn rule" – meaning that America needed to take responsibility for the consequences of its actions. And that lofty rhetorical ideal was echoed by other military figures, such as William McRaven, a former US navy admiral, in his bestselling book *Make Your Bed*.

But Trump is no Powell or McRaven. On Tuesday, the German chancellor, Friedrich Merz, told him that "we have to talk about... what is following after this regime" – in other words, the consequences of bombing Iran.

Trump replied that "we'll see what happens with the people [of Iran]". Glib? Yes. But it also reveals a mindset that assumes that it is the locals who will be responsible for any future political mess after US intervention. So, too, in Venezuela.

This horrifies some. Mark Warner, the top Democrat on the Senate intelligence committee, complains about a lack of "phase two" planning. And the UAE billionaire Khalaf Ahmad Al Habtoor has dared to ask whether Trump has even calculated the "collateral damage" of war.

But this is about more than geopolitics. For instance, Trump has ignored the commercial mess from his tariffs and the financial risks from his campaign to loosen monetary policy or push retail investors into private capital funds, just as that bubble is imploding.

A cynic might retort that Trump is not unique. Empires throughout history (including the 19th-century British one) have usually ignored the physical

and social damage they cause. And other American leaders have also discounted the bad consequences of their policies. Just think of America's entanglement in Vietnam, or its abandonment of the gold standard.

However, what is so jarring today for leaders in Europe and Japan is that their own cultures often retain admiration for the ideals espoused by Fulghum. Just look at all the recycling done in Switzerland or Sweden, or the diligence with which ordinary Japanese collect their own litter. Or note how often Japanese leaders apologise for current mistakes, or German ones for transgressions committed during the second world war. To many, it seems shameful to create a physical or moral "mess". Not so in today's White House.

Why? Trump's personal narcissism is one explanation. But as a former disciple of anthropology, I suspect he has crystallised broader cultural trends too. One of these arises from geography: whereas the Japanese inhabit a cramped island and know that resources are constrained, America is vast. When conditions got crowded, pioneers were encouraged to "go west" – and escape any mess.

In addition to that, America's global military reach is so extensive that the political mess this might unleash feels very distant to most voters. And inside America, rising income inequality means that the elites (including those in the White House) are increasingly cocooned in separate, privileged spaces

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and surrounded by servants who clean things up. As F Scott Fitzgerald noted, great wealth can induce "carelessness".

Then there is another, more subtle, issue: disruption. The anthropologist Mary Douglas once observed that "dirt" is essentially "matter out of place". In cultural terms it is something that breaches normal systems of classification. The Japanese hate this, since they revere rigid taxonomies to maintain harmony.

But Trump prides himself on smashing the status quo. So while Powell had his pottery rule, Trump's tagline might be more like this: "You cannot make an omelette without breaking eggs – and the eggshells are someone else's problem."

So remember that as the mess from Iran keeps spreading, creating instability across the Middle East, energy shocks in Asia and Europe and potential inter-ethnic conflict between the Kurds and others. Yes, this looks morally deplorable to many non-Americans, and alarming for investors. But mess is a feature, not a bug, of Trump's world – and it will not be easily tidied up.

[gillian.tett@ft.com](mailto:gillian.tett@ft.com)

## Iran and the war of unintended consequences

*Israel and the US have achieved many military aims, but the fallout poses threats to everyone*

Lawrence Freedman

A good rule of thumb is that the unintended consequences of any military operation can be as – or more – important than the intended ones. This is particularly the case with the war being waged by Israel and the US against Iran.

In a nod to international law, the Trump administration claimed it went to war because there was an imminent threat that required pre-emption, perhaps even a nuclear weapon or an intercontinental ballistic missile. No intelligence was offered to back this up. The messaging accompanying the opening strikes suggested that this conflict would mark the end of a terrible regime that has been persecuting its people and fomenting regional conflict for decades.

But while the government has undoubtedly been rocked by the assassination of the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, it has yet to fall apart. Many in Iran would be delighted to see the end of a tyrannical, corrupt regime. Unfortunately, the opposition is disorganised and lacks firepower.

At first, Trump seemed to think that a reconfigured regime might negotiate with the US. He mused about the possibility of a Venezuela scenario, in which Nicolás Maduro was abducted and Washington dealt with his underlings while leaving the democratic opposition frustrated. This is not an option in

Tehran. The carnage inflicted on Iran and the mayhem caused in retaliation has been too great. Trump has declared himself surprised that so many potentially compliant alternatives to Khamenei have already been killed.

Now Trump demands unconditional surrender and a hand in choosing Iran's next leader while insisting he won't make the unpopular move of sending ground forces. As always, he assumes that if he hits his adversaries hard enough they will bend to his will. In practice, without a substantial US ground presence, events could soon move beyond Washington's control with consequences no one can predict.

It is possible that the regime will implode, with its remaining leaders fleeing and the Revolutionary Guards scattering. But the resulting power vacuum would be difficult to fill with a new government that enjoys wide support. Iran is a vast country with a complex social structure. Many long-suppressed groups are likely to demand a role in the new order and apt to become angry if denied. Unlike 1979, when the leaders of the Islamic revolution inherited a wealthy country with a strong oil-based economy, it is now in meltdown and public services are failing.

The precedents are not encouraging. When a country starts to suffer from chronic instability it requires an enormous effort, and considerable resources, to stabilise it. If this can't be achieved, there could be a variety of knock-on effects around the region, including flows of refugees.

In 1991, after a US-led coalition defeated Saddam Hussein's army, forcing it to retreat from Kuwait, Iraqi Kurds

and Shia rebelled. These uprisings were suppressed ruthlessly as coalition forces looked on. After US and UK forces occupied Iraq in 2003, they were unable to stop a descent into vicious intercommunal violence. It took five years to get some sort of grip on the situation.

In Afghanistan things looked hopeful after the Taliban were pushed out of government. Eventually they regrouped and after two decades returned to power. In Libya in 2011 Colonel Muammar Gaddafi was killed and his regime collapsed. The US, UK and France helped the rebels but then left them on

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their own – the experience of Iraq deterred them from trying to exert control. The result was civil war and intense factional fighting.

Some severe unintended consequences are already with us. The Trump administration appears to have been surprised by the way in which Iran lashed out across the region with the aim of putting the Gulf states under pressure and causing a major international economic crisis.

In the long term this *Götterdämmerung* strategy may confirm Iran's fate; neighbours who were ready for an accommodation with the regime now have a stake in its downfall. But in the short term it has had some success.

Iran has long threatened to close the

Strait of Hormuz if attacked, so there is no excuse for being caught out by this development. Trump has promised insurance cover and naval escorts, though it is not clear that the US has many to spare. For now, ships are hesitating. Iranian strikes against oil and gas facilities, which have led to surges in prices, have alarmed investors, and government supplies of liquefied natural gas are a particular worry.

There is a race to take out Iran's missile launchers while there are still sufficient interceptors to deal with those missiles that can be launched. Drones are less deadly but are coming through in larger numbers – providing Ukraine with an opportunity to prove its value in dealing with this threat, as the world leader in successfully intercepting Shahed drones on the cheap. Trump was still being rude about President Volodymyr Zelenskyy as this war began; perhaps he had not imagined he might need the Ukrainian president's help just a few days after it started.

The intended part of the war is going to plan. Israel and the US quickly achieved command of the skies so that they could attack targets with impunity. They have further obliterated the already supposedly obliterated nuclear programme; they have eliminated the Iranian navy and depleted Iran's stocks of missiles and production capacity. But the unintended consequences will largely be in the political, social and economic spheres – and they will be felt for some time.

*The writer is emeritus professor of war studies at King's College London and author of "Strategists and Strategy"*

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