



REFLECTIONS

{ THE BIG PICTURE }

Where nature, progress, people breathe together

As connectivity deepens through new air routes, highways, and digital corridors, the Northeast is emerging as India's natural gateway to Southeast Asia. This region is no more the frontier of India, it is now its forward face

There are journeys that fill the mind, and there are journeys that fill the soul. My recent visit to Assam and Meghalaya was both. It was an experience that left me deeply moved and profoundly inspired.

The breathtaking beauty of the Northeast is matched only by the warmth, simplicity, and indomitable spirit of its people, who have left a lasting impression on me. I return home from this visit with a renewed resolve to work even harder and with greater rigour for the region's progress and prosperity.

Under the leadership of Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi, the government of India is transforming the Northeast into a vibrant centre of connectivity, culture, and commerce. Had it not been for his far-sighted vision and ability to turn challenges into opportunities, this resurgence of hope and possibility might still have remained a distant dream.

As the region turns from being landlocked to land-linked, one can feel the pulse of transformation where development walks hand in hand with inclusivity and dignity.

The trip began on a high note with an enterprising visit to the Mushroom Development Centre in Upper Shillong, a quiet revolution in the heart of Meghalaya, where science and community have joined hands to transform rural livelihoods. Established in 1982 under the North Eastern Council, it now houses the newly set up Shiitake Mushroom Production and Training Centre, producing nearly 1.5 lakh sawdust blocks each year, each capable of yielding a kilogram of shiitake mushrooms valued at up to ₹1,000 in the market.

Beyond the numbers, what stayed with me were the faces and stories of the farmers I met, their eyes gleaming with pride as they spoke of how this initiative is driven by a purpose of creating dignified livelihoods, and nurturing green entrepreneurship, and growing a truly *atmanirbhar* (self-reliant) Northeast envisioned by our PM.

My next stop had me amidst the clouds of Sohra, and it truly felt like stepping into another world. When I opened the balcony door of my room, the clouds came waltzing in, as if in a rush to cradle me and welcome me to the heaven that is Meghalaya, in every sense, "an abode of clouds".

Among the most profound moments of my journey was walking across Meghalaya's living root bridges in Rangthylliang, an experience that truly transcends time and imagination.

The three-hour trek through dense forests and gentle streams felt eternal, as though Mother Nature herself were embracing humankind to guide, to nurture, and to guard. The bridge stretched nearly 175 ft in length and six ft in breadth, woven

entirely from the aerial roots of ancient rubber fig trees.

To walk upon it was to tread on the breathing architecture of resilience and creativity — as if Mother Nature herself provided a pathway to meet, to connect, and to coexist. For it is she who protects and provides; and within her labyrinth, upon her sacred soil, we are reminded of our oldest duty to preserve, to protect, to worship and to be grateful.

As I walked across the bridge, guided by our wonderful local guide Morning Star, whose name itself seemed to light the path ahead, and Laborious Syiem, whose deep connection with the land spoke volumes, sharing stories of how these bridges are living bonds between generations. I felt the nurturing green entrepreneurship, and growing a truly *atmanirbhar* (self-reliant) Northeast envisioned by our PM.

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Jyotiraditya M Scindia



The Mawmluh Cave's narrow opening leads to a passage carved over 4,200 years — a subterranean archive of Earth's memory, with vast chambers, narrow passages, and underground streams merging in rhythm.

SHUTTERSTOCK

Centre, eco-parks, and cultural precincts, this circuit will be a model of sustainable tourism rooted in pride and dignity for all.

After the root bridge excursion, the explorer in me yearned to journey even deeper into the heart of nature's mysteries. That spirit led me to venture into Mawmluh Cave, where silence itself speaks. As I set off, the cave's narrow opening welcomed me into a passage carved over 4,200 years, a subterranean archive of Earth's memory, with vast chambers, narrow passages, and underground streams merging in rhythm. Stretching over seven km through limestone, the cave is internationally recognised as the geological marker of the Meghalayan Age. I walked almost three kilometres into its ancient depths, following the carved path of water and rock. Untouched by human hands and lit only by the gentle shimmer of water on stone, it felt like entering the womb of the Earth itself. The slow dripping of water forming stalactites and stalagmites, and the moon-milk formations glowing faintly on the walls, each movement was time incarnate, reminding us that we are but fleeting visitors in her grand, ongoing creation.

Halfway in, I paused and meditated, surrounded by stillness so deep it felt eternal. In that moment of tranquillity, I felt a light radiating from something deeper, a metaphor for India's own growth journey. Our emergence as Vishwaguru is accompanied by the gradual unfolding of long-held potential, like a light once dormant now rising to guide others. My cave coach, the extraordinary Bob Ryan, now 81 years old and caving since the age of 18, led the way with calm and expert assurance. The dusk led us to the rhythmic echoes of the Shillong Chamber Choir, whose every note reminded us that tourism in the Northeast is not about sight-seeing; it is about soul-seeing.

In Guwahati, I inaugurated the North Eastern Science and Technology (NEST) Cluster at IIT Guwahati and laid the foundation stones for ₹635 crore worth of development projects across Assam, from schools and bridges to industrial estates that will nurture youth-led enterprises, women entrepreneurs, and community based tourism. The NEST Cluster will serve as the beating heart of innovation for the region, connecting research, local entrepreneurship, and sustainable livelihoods to create

an ecosystem of opportunity. These are not just projects; they are promises of transformation, inclusion, and pride, built on the foundation of PM Modi's unwavering commitment to the Northeast.

As connectivity deepens through new air routes, highways, and digital corridors, the Northeast is emerging as India's natural gateway to Southeast Asia. Under the PM's vision of Act East, Act Fast, Act First, this region is not just the frontier of India, it is now its forward face. For every explorer, the Northeast is not just a place to visit but a way to imbibe nature and build oneself inside out. The eight wonders that our PM reveres as the *ashtalakshmi* are not merely corners of a map; they are the precious gems in Bharat's crown, each radiating its own light. As we cherish, preserve, and promote these wonders, we strengthen not only the region's growth but also the spirit of a New Bharat, proud, inclusive, and connected to its roots.

Jyotiraditya M. Scindia is minister for communications and development of north eastern region. The views expressed are personal

{ SUNDAY SENTIMENTS }

Karan Thapar



A manual that may satisfy even Gen Z

If you're too young to have read David Reuben's 1969 best-seller *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex but Were Afraid to Ask* and you haven't got around to the *Kama Sutra*, then Shobhaa De's latest book might be of interest. It's called *The Sensual Self: Explorations of Love, Sex & Romance*. Last week she asked her publisher to send me a copy and I spent the next few days reading it.

I would describe it as a manual on how to make love and how not to, the different ways of attempting it and how to enhance your pleasure. Some chapters could be inappropriate for a family newspaper. But there's a lot that's just fun.

Not surprisingly, Shobhaa is rather concerned about how women are treated. "Women need to feel valued, respected and adored!" she writes. "Men take it for granted that the woman who has agreed to sleep with them, worships the ground they walk on and is doing so out of grati-

tude. She is expected to feel grateful for having been picked up over many rivals waiting to warm this man's bed."

I was struck by her description of what we in the north call *suhag raat*. She believes we make too much of it. "It's over-romanticised and given far too much importance, when in reality, it's often the terrified, ignorant bride who is sacrificed at the altar of 'legit sex' ... the girl is like a trapped young animal, unable to escape, not permitted to scream in terror, often slapped and beaten till she is almost senseless." So, do wives hate their first night? It's not a question many men think of.

The book is full of wonderful tips. Consider this on coquetry. "Undressing is a fine art." Shobhaa then explains how it should be done. "How and when to drop the *pallu* or *dupatta* can be mastered ... the trick is to make it look like an accident ... timing is everything. And the languorous movement of gently picking up the folds and replacing the errant *pallu* to its

rightful place on the shoulder — now that, my dear, is a fine art." I wonder how many in Gen Z attract their amours with such guile?

Shobhaa's scathing about how people approach love-making. "Most couples fall into a monotonous pattern in which love-making is made to fit in between 'more important' domestic and social obligations. Love-making gets low priority when it should receive top billing." Once again, it's all about how you treat the woman in your arms. "Women of my age and temperament, admire subtlety and finesse. Experience and patience."

Shobhaa has a whole chapter on kissing. "A kiss is one of the most underrated acts of love-making ... we tend to disregard the aesthetics of a kiss ... a satisfying kiss is a complete act of love-making in itself by itself, if done right."

Much the same is true, it seems, of hand-holding. "Hand-holding is intensely intimate. There are myriad ways to hold hands. Words become redundant, when two people link fingers and walk confidently together, sure of the other's feelings." The only thing is very few men and women in India hold hands in public.

Shobhaa makes an interesting connection between gastronomic and carnal tastes. "Food and sex are intimately linked. Both involve heightened pleasure and deep hunger ... an indifferent eater will be a lousy lover ... a person who doesn't look at what's going into the mouth cannot be trusted in bed!" Let me

"HAND-HOLDING IS INTENSELY INTIMATE ... WORDS BECOME REDUNDANT, WHEN TWO PEOPLE LINK FINGERS AND WALK CONFIDENTLY TOGETHER, SURE OF THE OTHER'S FEELINGS," SHOBHAA DE WRITES IN HER NEW BOOK. THE ONLY THING IS VERY FEW MEN AND WOMEN IN INDIA HOLD HANDS IN PUBLIC

now reveal a secret. I adore my food and eat as much with my eyes as I do with my palate!

Now Shobhaa's canvas is wide and these essays cover a range of sexual acts from kinky to group sex, from faking orgasms to vaginal beauty aids. Each is written in Shobhaa's matchless and unmistakable style. Short sentences, blunt phrases, tantalising questions and neat conclusions.

Even if you think you know it all, there's a lot you'll discover that'll be new and surprising. Happy reading!

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

{ ENGENDER }

Lalita Panicker



Peace building needs more women leading the talks

As conflicts increase around the world, women must be made a part of the resolution mechanisms. Studies across regions show that women's participation in peace negotiations leads to better and more long-lasting outcomes, bringing different perspectives, empathy, and strategies to the table. Despite these findings, a 2024 United Nations (UN) report revealed that women made up only 7% of negotiators, with many peace talks taking place without any women's involvement. This glaring gap points to missed opportunities for more sustainable peace. The importance of women's participation and leadership in conflict prevention, resolution, peace-building, and recovery is an absolute necessity. Recognising this, the global community, led by efforts such as UN Security Council Resolution 1325, has promoted the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda for 25 years. Coinciding with this, 2025 marked the silver jubilee of Women in Security, Conflict Management and Peace (WISCOMP) — whose work predates even the UN's WPS initiative. WISCOMP was a pioneer long before the international community began to widely recognise the importance of gender-sensitive approaches in conflict resolution.

At a meet in Delhi on October 30, WISCOMP showcased its peace building efforts in South Asia and beyond, chronicling its journey through the film *Seeking Peace, Speaking Peace*, directed by Radhika Chandrasekhar, which captured the organisation's efforts at advancing gender-sensitive peace building and cultivating cultures of co-existence. The evening's highlight was the release of *Peace-Notes*, a commemorative volume that brings together the voices of peace animators.

The organisation, led by its director, Meenakshi Gopinath, has worked steadily and tirelessly in this challenging field. Reflecting on the journey, Gopinath shared, "WISCOMP started as a small initiative in 1999, pioneering the discourse on women, peace, and secu-

rity in South Asia. We offered alternative narratives — on human security, peacebuilding, and the leadership of women in international affairs and diplomacy. Little did we then imagine the ground we would traverse. The incredible range of engagements and the expanding community of practice surprised even us. The trail blazed by the small but dedicated team of WISCOMP yielded rich networks, collaborators, partners, and well-wishers across policy and practice spaces."

WISCOMP has built a vibrant network of women peacebuilders across South Asia — a template for the global community to follow. The overarching message is peace building requires partnerships across regions, sectors, and actors. For gender-sensitive peace building, women must acquire tools for facilitating dialogue, capacity building, and developing innovative pedagogies for peace. It requires nurturing networks and addressing both cultural and structural violence.

Real change is being fostered by women at the grassroots. However, we must pay attention to the everyday resistance, activism, and agency of women. We have to move beyond tokenism and stereotypes and recognise the full spectrum of women's experiences in peacebuilding — from negotiating ceasefires, advocating for women's rights, facilitating dialogue, and leading reconciliation efforts, to reconstructing communities and healing trauma. Transformative change demands both policy shifts and societal reflection to value and centre women's voices in all peace processes.

Ranjana Kumari, director, Centre for Social Research, says, "Peace is neither real nor lasting without women's leadership. Their inclusion transforms negotiations into pathways for justice and reconciliation. WISCOMP's journey reaffirms that sustainable peace begins when women move from the margins to the centre of decision-making."

The views expressed are personal

What matters most at Indian weddings

The *shaadi* (wedding) season is upon us, a time when the Indian man is confused about whether to dress up like the long-gone *gora saahibs* (White overlords) or try and mimic some erstwhile maharaja's attire. A suit or a *sherwani* — the choice rests on which version of Stockholm syndrome you are particularly prone to. Attending a wedding is like time travel. You meet people from your past — relatives who held you in their arms, cousins you grew up with, and that cheery uncle with *paan* stained teeth who grabbed your father's ancestral land. And even the same judgemental guests who comment on the bride's weight and the wedding feast alike.

Wedding dates are almost always decided by astrologers, and hence converge at that particular time of the year that has a bunch of "auspicious dates". For the rest of the year, it is back to dating apps and matrimonial websites for the "eligible".

"Thirty-six thousand weddings in Delhi today", a headline throws a dizzying number at you, hinting at a murderous supply crunch of banquet halls, caterers, pool-sides, *bandwallas*, *pandits*, make-up artists, and, inevitably, roads one can drive on. It is entirely a man-made scarcity that jacks up prices so bad that it eats up middle-class life savings. "*Beti ki shaadi ke liye bacha ke rakho* (save for the daughter's wedding)," goes the logic. Most of us are willing participants, though. Marriage is one of life's biggest bets;

so, your parents try to minimise any bad luck and pay through the nose just to have the nuptials on the "auspicious date". The wedding industry runs on the unwritten rule of reciprocity: "How can you not attend their wedding? They attended yours!" Hence, everybody visits everybody unwillingly.

Recently, after the intergalactic drive from Gurgaon to Greater Noida, I managed to join the *baraat* (groom's procession) of a wedding I was invited to. I felt right at home, as it started-stopped 78 times before reaching the venue. By the 75th time, the entire town had been apprised of the fact that "*Aaj mere yaar ki shaadi hai* (it's my friend's wedding today)". Scrawny adolescents with heavy fancy lights balanced on their tiny heads watched me with expectant eyes, hoping I don't spend all my tips on the performative enthusiasm of the *dhol-wala*.

The dancing contingent consisted of the groom's batchmates from engineering college — not the guys from his B-school who clapping from the sides, cautiously appreciating the raw "undergrad" bonhomie. Life has changed since they learnt the concept of diminishing marginal utility. Soon enough, we reached the venue and the cousins in-charge of the fireworks contributed 51 AQI points each to pollution. The air was already thick with a wiry, Aviator-sporting band singer belting out out-of-context Daler Mehndi numbers. What heartfelt message can *Tunak Tunak Tun* convey to the bride?

The party felt like a kaleidoscope of our



Attending a wedding is like time travel. You meet relatives who held you in their arms and cousins you grew up with.

HT PHOTO

culture, history, and our insecurities. Shiny, sparkling people unfazed by the recent spurt in gold prices, out to prove all the stereotypes about their community. "Beta, how much salary do you get in-hand," I was asked with a straight face. They don't want to hear about your boring ESOPs. "Actually, I run a business," I replied. There are barely any businessmen in my community. If you are one, it is assumed that you didn't go to a good college or crack a government exam. And if you are a private-sector professional, the scramble is to figure out which company you work for and your designation.

A government servant commands the most swag at these weddings — with gold-rimmed specs, a neat side-parting of the hair, and, more often than not, clad in a safari suit. Relatives flock to him with their college-going kids to ask for his phone number. "*Aapke jaisa hi banna chahta hai ye*. Thoda guidance de dijiye (He wants to be a government officer like you, kindly guide him)." The man makes empty promises, while poking *dahi* kebabs on his quarter

plate with a toothpick. One relative notices the plate emptying, and hollers at the nearest guy serving appetizers, "Arey boss, *jeenjaji ke liye bhara kebab laao jaldi* (Get brother-in-law some kebabs quickly)!"

"AI course karo beta, bahut scope hai (Enrol for a course in Artificial Intelligence. Lots of potential there)," *jeenjaji* says and wanders off with his fresh plate of *dahi* kebab. Meanwhile, the business guy has excused himself from the group, to receive updates about an unloading at his warehouse.

The real draw of the wedding is not the admirable toxicity of relatives, or the bride or the groom; it's the food. As I grew up and learnt to not burn my tongue with the steamed coffee from the espresso machine, I realised the centre of gravity at a wedding is the *chaat* counter. Since then, I have never missed a wedding, and always dressed up like the Maharaja of Patiala.

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Abhishek Asthana

{ SUNDAY LETTERS }

Having a hobby is worth the time

This is with reference to "Leisure as time for intellectual renewal" by Pavan K Varma (November 02). The article pointed out the importance of acquiring a hobby in today's busy world. It helps in rejuvenation of body and mind, and rekindles our spirit, which might result in better productivity.

Anuradha Bisaria

Remembering Ritwik Ghatak

This is with reference to "Cloud-capped Star, Auteur of Partition" by Amrit Gangar (November 02). I was deeply moved by the article, where Gangar's evocative tribute beautifully captures the tragic poetics and enduring legacy of Ghatak's cinema.

Ashish Avikunthak

II

In the centenary year of Ritwik Ghatak's birth, Amrit Gangar's tribute places Ghatak's contribution to cinema in a historical perspective. It is filled with the author's own observations and is well-studied.

Ajay Rawal

Write to us at: letters@hindustantimes.com

Buck for ballot? Why a Nitish win won't be a victory for freebies

SWAMINOMICS



**SWAMINATHAN S
ANKLESARIA AIYAR**

Can elections be bought with cash handouts to voters? For over 50 years, my view has been 'no'. Prime Minister Modi too has often dubbed freebies as 'revadis'. Yet, the NDA govt in Bihar announced Rs 10,000 in cash to 1.4 crore female members of self-help groups in Bihar: Pensions were also raised to Rs 13,200 per month. While RJD's Tejashwi Yadav has countered this with a promise of transferring Rs 30,000 into the accounts of women annually for "long-term economic relief", the NDA has already credited the money directly to bank accounts, eliminating intermediaries, leakages, and delays. The overwhelming majority of women met on an election tour said they had received the cash, making it very different from the usual fancy promises that are soon forgotten.

The loss of 63 seats in the 2024 general election seems to be the reason it decided to compete in cash dols in the subsequent Haryana and Maharashtra state elections. If the NDA wins easily in

Bihar—which looks likely after touring the state—will I have to modify my stance on the electoral impact of freebies too?

Not necessarily. Kanhaiya Kumar of the Congress declared that caste would always triumph over freebies, and success depended on finding the right caste allies. Other state politicians agreed.

Those opposing the INDIA alliance fear a return of Lalu Yadav's 'jungle raj' of 1990-2005. Lalu ended the stranglehold of upper castes and gave the lower castes power and self-respect, but at the cost of allowing lower-caste and Muslim mafia dons to make merry. Crime was so rampant that people feared being out of their homes after 5.30 pm.

Half of Bihar's voters are too young to know how bad the jungle raj was, but the older half remembers — and shudders. Tejashwi Yadav, Lalu's son and the main opposition Mahagathbandhan's (MGB) chief ministerial candidate, emphasises employment rather than caste war. But, said a businessman, even if Tejashwi starts by keeping the old mafia dons under control, they would become unmanageable after a year or two.

In the Haryana state election, BJP promised women Rs 2,100 per month, free bus rides for the poor, and a Rs 2,000/acre bonus for kharif crops. Additional-

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ly, it promised unemployed youth allowances of Rs 1,200-3,500 per month. Congress promised Rs 2,000 per month to women, an old-age pension of Rs 6,000, and free electricity of 300 units per household.

Till 2024, the BJP had invariably fared worse in a state election than the preceding general election — a pattern often attributed to the 'Modi effect'. In the 2024 general election, Congress and BJP won five seats each in Haryana. So, the Congress was confident of winning in the state election that followed. But BJP won 48 seats to the Congress' 37.

Next came the Maharashtra state election. This, too, turned out to be a battle of revadis. In the Lok Sabha poll, the BJP plus the Shinde-led splinter of the Shiv Sena won only 17 seats out of



BANKING ON HER: The cash has already reached the bank accounts of many women but let's not forget the role caste and economic development play

48 — a debacle. Immediately after his alliance's defeat in the general election, then chief minister Eknath Shinde announced payment of Rs 1,500 a month for poorer women under his CM Ladki Bahin Yojana. The Congress promised to increase this to Rs 2,000 per month if elected. Shinde, who is now deputy CM, indicated that he would raise it to Rs 3,000 if elected. His handsome victory led many to speculate that revadis were the new election winners. Rahul Gandhi accused the ruling party of manipulation, a claim rejected by the Election Commission.

Neither Bihar's politicians nor voters are interested in hard economic data. In

2008, I wrote about how backward Bihar had suddenly achieved 12% growth in state GDP. Our correspondent in Patna rang Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar, asking if he had seen the story on Bihar's record fast growth. Nitish replied after a brief pause, "If Swaminathan Aiyar says so, I dare say it is correct." He did not care or worry about growth rates.

Over the last 20 years of Nitish Kumar's tenure, Bihar's compound annual growth rate (CAGR) has been 10.2%, higher than in any state, save Gujarat (11.3%), Tripura (10.9%) and Mizoram (10.2%). It is also better than in Tamil Nadu (9.9%) or Karnataka (9.6%).

Bihar has long been India's poorest state with the worst social indicators. But it has fared well under Nitish. The state is so far behind others that it will take a century to catch up. But it is improving.

Big companies are not lining up to invest. But an industrial estate owner told me that his estate was empty in 2010 but now over-booked. There is an underlying solidity to Nitish's performance.

When so many other factors are at play, from caste to economic development, a big victory for Nitish will not prove that his handout to women was conclusive, or even a major factor. So, I remain a sceptic on freebies. ■

Mamdani: Win of global socialism's new face has lessons for India

BY INVITATION



BHASKAR SUNKARA

When Zohran Mamdani was elected mayor of New York City this week, it marked a political first: the most prominent democratic socialist to hold executive office in the US — and one with deep Indian roots.

Born in Kampala, Uganda, to academic Mahmood Mamdani and filmmaker Mira Nair, Zohran represents a global story. His father was among the Ugandan Asians expelled by Idi Amin in 1972, an experience he has written about at length. His mother, Mira Nair, was born and raised in India before moving abroad for university and her film career. It's not surprising that his campaign resonated across New York's South Asian communities, from Queens to Brooklyn, among Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and Christians alike. He canvassed in fluent Hindi, and even tried his hand, less proficiently, at Bengali, often joking about his pronunciation as he spoke about housing and transit to immigrant audiences who saw something of themselves in him.

I've known Zohran casually through my work with the same organisation he belongs to: Democratic Socialists of America. But besides his charisma and personal touch, he's the real deal — a Marxist by training and conviction. His politics aren't the vague progressivism of the liberal Left. They're rooted in a critique of capitalism and the belief that democracy extends beyond the ballot box to the workplace and the economy itself.



THUS CAPITAL: His success or failure will shape how seriously Americans take socialism in power

This approach can travel. It might not look the same in every place—what resonates in cosmopolitan New York won't play the same way in a conservative Midwestern district—but the underlying principle is universal. When the Left organises around material needs rather than moral superiority, when it speaks to people as workers rather than as identity groups, it wins trust.

A NEW FACE FOR GLOBAL SOCIALISM

That lesson isn't just for Americans. In India, as in much of the world, political debates are often framed in terms of faith and identity. Mamdani's campaign offered a counterexample: a politics that cuts across those lines, built around what unites working people rather than what divides them. It shows that socialist politics can thrive in the heart of global capitalism, even under the shadow of billionaires and investment bankers. Mamdani also represents a generational shift. He's young, at ease with culture and technology, and fluent in the moral language of equality. Yet he's also rooted in a long tradition—the child of postcolonial intellectuals, the inheritor of both Indian and African diasporic histories, and now a leader in an American city built by immigrants. In that sense, his story mirrors the Left's enduring promise: solidarity that crosses borders, classes, and creeds.

HARD PART BEGINS

Of course, governing New York City will test any idealist. It's one of the most complex bureaucracies in the world, with more than 300,000 municipal workers and countless entrenched interests. Even mild reforms can face resistance — not only from property developers and business lobbies, but also from within city institutions and unions concerned about how change will affect their members. Mamdani's challenge will be to translate movement energy into administrative effectiveness. His success or failure will shape how seriously Americans take socialism in power.

But he starts from a position of strength: a mandate built on clear promises and an engaged base ready to defend them. His campaign reminded voters that the Left isn't just about moral protest. It's about competence, compassion, and the belief that ordinary people deserve more control over their lives. ■

Sunkara is the founding editor of Jacobin and the president of The Nation magazine

80 years on, UN is facing not just a funds crisis, but a crisis of relevance

Writing a book about your grandfather can be tricky, but Thant Myint-U knew he had to do it: too little was known about U Thant, the first non-western and first person of colour to head the UN. Through his book, *Peacemaker: U Thant, the United Nations and the Untold Story of the 1960s*, Myint-U attempts to not only fill this vacuum but also reframe history. He tells Shruti Sonal why India must keep pressing for a permanent seat on the Security Council despite the hurdles

You open the book by noting how several Hollywood films have been made on the Cuban missile crisis and the Vietnam War — yet none feature U Thant, who as the first non-Western UN Secretary-General, was at the heart of both. Why do you think his “quest for a just world,” as you put it, has been forgotten? It's a mix of reasons. The 1960s was a period when the UN was working well in many ways. It was successful because the newly independent countries of Asia and Africa had joined the organisation, transformed it and made it their own. The international system that we have today is not just the creation of 1945 and the victors of World War II (the Americans, the British, and the Russians), but of countries like India and Burma, which worked to create a system based on the sovereign equality of states. But that doesn't really fit in with the Western narrative of how our world came to be. So, the story of all these different people, who were so important in creating this world, has been virtually airbrushed out of history. There is also the very specific story of U Thant. He was someone who got on extremely well with the big powers and especially with the Americans in the aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis. But later he fell out with Washington over Vietnam and the Arab-Israeli conflict. One of the reasons I wanted to write this book is because I think we have to re-frame entirely the global history of the 20th century.

The book appears just as the UN marked its 80th anniversary — a milestone shadowed by funding cuts and debates over its role. How can it adapt and remain relevant in today's fractured world? The future of the UN is very much in doubt. It has strayed from the vision of its founders and its core mandate of preventing and ending wars. It has become too reliant on western donors, for many of its programs. And now that a lot of funding is cut from the US and from other countries, the UN is in crisis. But we can't simply go back to the UN at an earlier time. There's an urgent need to reimagine the global security architecture we will need in the coming decades because the threat of a great power war and nuclear war is greater than it's been for a very long time.

You've also worked for the UN, in peacekeeping missions and at the secretariat in New York. Do the funding cuts, especially from the US, hint at a deeper crisis? The American funding cuts have been very severe. What's also telling is that no other country has really stepped into the breach and offered to make up the difference. The UN has not just a financial crisis, but also a crisis of relevance. Whether it's Ukraine, the Middle East or possible confrontations between the US and China in the western Pacific, we have to ask ourselves, is the UN today properly set up and resourced to deal with the crises at hand? We have to make sure that we don't sleepwalk back into the kinds of dynamics that led to world wars in the past, as proliferation of nuclear weapons has only increased the dangers.

Many of the conflicts that you mentioned have persisted from your grandfather's time. Do you think diplomats and politicians have failed to learn from history? What's important for people to think about is that at the height of the Cold War in the early 1960s, when we were not sure where rising global tensions were going to lead, the answers didn't come from Washington or Moscow. The answers came from very unexpected quarters — primarily the newly independent countries of what was then called the Third World. These countries pushed forward ideas on disarmament, decolonisation, peace-making and global cooperation. And they weren't just ideas. It was the UN that

they remade that prevented a nuclear war. For example, during the Cuban Missile Crisis, it was U Thant, with Major General Indarjit Rikhye from India and others from the newly independent countries, who de-escalated what could have been a catastrophic war between the Soviet Union and the US. Also important to remember is that deadlocks in the Security Council didn't prevent the Secretaries-General of those early decades from acting. Having the right person in that role who's willing to take risks and be a peacemaker is crucial. We're going to choose a new secretary general in a few months, and it'll be a pivotal choice for the world.

You call the Thant-led UN efforts in mediating a ceasefire in the 1965 Indo-Pak war as one of the “rare occasions” where the UN functioned as intended. Recently, it has come under quite a bit of criticism for becoming irrelevant as a mediator. What are your views? It's difficult and perhaps unfair to choose one particular crisis and say, why isn't the Secretary General doing more on this right now. Decades of political underinvestment in the office have resulted in the role becoming far weaker than in the past. We no longer have the instinct of turning to the Secretary General when a conflict breaks out or a confrontation looks like it's going to lead to war.

What reforms would you suggest? I think it's urgent that the Secretariat be remade to focus on ending the wars we have and prevent the wars that might come. We need countries that will lead this effort. That doesn't mean that the UN shouldn't be involved in issues like climate change and the global economy, but the UN is also not going to be the answer to all the world's problems. We have 80 years of history to look at and to understand what the UN is actually good at and what it's not good at. What it cannot shy away from is its role as the only universal peace organisation that we've ever had in human history and its founding purpose to prevent another world war. We're going to see a Security Council that's going to be deadlocked on key issues, as it has through most of its history. So, reinvesting in the role of the Secretary General to be the impartial mediator-in-chief who can help de-escalate tensions and find solutions is important.

India has long sought a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. How do you assess its prospects? India absolutely deserves a place on the Security Council and India's membership will greatly enhance the body's legitimacy. It should continue to push for that seat. However, I think realistically it's going to be very difficult given the vetoes of existing members and the multitude of claimants.

Why reform through judicial diktat is fraught with perils

BY INVITATION



PRASHANT REDDY T



CHITRAKSHI JAIN

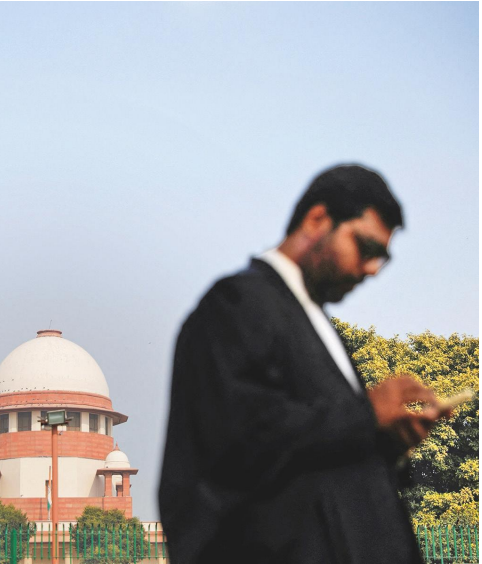
Last week, the Allahabad high court again pushed back against the Supreme Court's involvement in matters concerning the service conditions of the district judiciary. This is not the first time the two have differed on the issue. In 2022, the then Attorney General K K Venugopal, appearing for Allahabad high court, argued that the Constitution did not give the apex court the power to issue administrative instructions to the high courts on docket management. The backdrop for that case was an extraordinary delay at the Allahabad HC over the enforcement of an arbitration award. Instead of limiting itself to the case at hand, the SC began directing the HC to create a roadmap for resolving delays.

These crusades led by different apex court judges have taken different forms over the years, with cases ranging from the pendency of cheque bouncing cases and criminal appeals to vacancies and infrastructure at the level of the district judiciary. In many of these cases, the SC's recommendations ranged from ordering high courts to notify “practice rules” drafted by court-appointed amici, to imposing arbitrary deadlines for completing specific tasks or deciding a particular set of cases on priority. Often, the SC continues to monitor the implementation of the directions it had issued.

There are several problems with these attempts to force reforms on the high courts through judicial diktats.

Foremost is the issue of constitutional propriety. The latest case involves the selection of judges and opportunities for career progression in the district judiciary — matters over which the Constitution has clearly vested the high courts and state govt with administrative control. Even the administrative directions issued to HCs, to prescribe listing norms, for example, do not have a constitutional basis. As pointed out by the A-G in 2022, the SC lacks authority to compel HCs to follow its prescriptions regarding their administrative functioning. The Constitution is clear— HCs are responsible for administering themselves and the district judiciary, and this has been reiterated by the SC itself. There is a certain wisdom to decentralising judicial administration to the high courts. It reflects the principles of federalism enshrined in the Constitution and allows administrators to respond to and accommodate local issues.

Second, does the SC have the moral standing to be lecturing any other judicial institution on delays and efficiency? In the infamous White Industries case (2011), an international arbitral tribunal flagged the pendency of an appeal over nine years before the Supreme Court, to declare that India was in breach of its treaty obligations under a bilateral investment treaty. This delay of



BENCH STRENGTH: The SC should also acknowledge its own failure in filling vacancies at high courts

nine years pales in comparison to the 13 years that the court took to decide a crucial case regarding the rights of states to tax mining of minerals. Similarly, when the SC lectures on delays in filling vacancies, it rarely acknowledges its own failure in filling vacancies at high courts. The Allahabad HC, as of this month, is short of 50 judges, i.e., a vacancy of 30%.

Third, this approach of reform through judicial diktat involves no public consultation on policy issues which often have complex second-order effects. Take, for example, the mandatory requirement of three years' practice which

the Supreme Court reinstated recently, for candidates seeking appointment to the judicial services. After this requirement was abolished in 2002, most high courts and the Bar Council of India complained loudly for over two decades that the decision had led to a deterioration in the quality of judges. However, it took the court 22 years to correct itself.

Fourth, this piecemeal approach to systemic problems often ends up disadvantaging one class of litigants. For example, when the SC orders the high courts and district judiciary to give high priority to a particular set of cases (e.g. criminal appeals or cheque bouncing cases) without addressing the systemic issues plaguing the judiciary, it will end up disadvantaging other classes of litigants who are entitled to similar speedy justice. The adversarial nature of the courtroom, which rarely lends itself to stakeholder consultations, should not be used to drive policymaking that impacts a wide range of people.

The two internal think tanks constituted by the SC over the last decade — the National Court Management Systems and the Centre for Planning & Research — exhibit a far more constructive approach to judicial reform. Over the last decade, these bodies have published thoughtful, empirically-driven policy documents covering different aspects of judicial administration. Given the lack of publicly available data on the administrative functioning of the judiciary, these records are sometimes the only source for such information despite the inconsistency in their publication timelines.

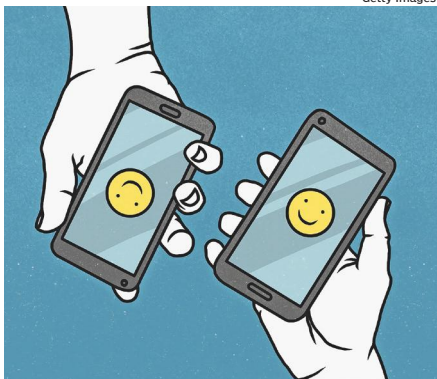
Although these institutions don't always follow the standards of public deliberation expected in a democratic country, they remain preferable over the perils of courtroom policymaking. ■

The writers are co-authors of 'Tareekh Pe Justice: Reforms for India's District Courts'

WORD DROP

HOPESCROLLING

For years, social media has been synonymous with doomscrolling — the endless consumption of grim news, war footage, disasters, and divisive politics. But now, some users are consciously doing the opposite: seeking out positive stories as an antidote to all that negativity. Enter hopescrolling. The trend came



alive recently following Zohran Mamdani's mayoral win in New York, when timelines of Gen Zers and millennials turned unexpectedly upbeat. Sure, the optimism depended on one's political leanings, but the memes, reels, and nostalgic tweets about the cultural impact of Dhoom Machale were a welcome change. For once, it was Dhoom over doom.

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

What's the Indian app in digital world



IMAGINE waking up in a world without Google Maps to guide you, no WhatsApp texts from your friends, no Instagram scrolls before bed and no Amazon boxes at your doorstep. Sounds like digital exile? Not in China. This has been a reality there for years, and the surprising part — they don't miss any of it.

While the rest of the world still runs on the familiar web of American apps, China has built an entirely self-sufficient digital ecosystem of its own. From chatting, shopping, navigating and streaming to paying utility bills, everything happens within homegrown apps.

While the rest of the world runs on the familiar web of American apps, China has built a self-sufficient digital ecosystem of its own. Can India, or should it, follow suit?



Their WeChat isn't just a messenger; it is a universe. You chat, pay your rent, order dinner, hail a cab, file taxes and even book a doctor appointment, all within one app. Douyin (TikTok's Chinese cousin) keeps millions glued to short videos. Baidu replaces Google, Taobao fills Amazon's shoes, Weibo and Little Red Book (Xiaohongshu) stand in for Twitter and Instagram, while Alipay and WeChat Pay have all but erased the need for physical cash.

China hasn't merely banned foreign apps, it has built better versions, tailored to its language, lifestyle and governance.

THE INDIA QUESTION

Now comes the intriguing question: can India do this too? Or should India do this? Let's hear from those watching the digital shift closely.

Mansher Singh Growar, founder and CEO of Bhejo Logistics, calls India's digital journey "nothing short of transformative". He says, "The UPI payment revolution, Aadhaar-based identity systems and the Digital India push have changed the way we transact and communicate. Yet, when it comes to social media and daily digital needs, we still depend largely on foreign platforms. Our conversations happen on WhatsApp and X, shopping on Amazon, official communication on Gmail and socialising on Facebook or Instagram. All

these are non-Indian platforms. This raises concerns about the safety of our data. Besides, these foreign entities have a hold on a major part of our digital advertising business."

In a similar vein, Sunil Kumar, software engineer, Konceive Development Centre, says, "While China has successfully built its own digital backbone, India is still dependent on foreign platforms despite having a massive Internet consumer base."

It's a fair point. India's online economy is booming. UPI transactions soared to an all-time high of ₹27.28 lakh crore, clocking 20.7 billion transactions in October alone. Yet, the infrastructure of daily digital life is still imported.

THE CASE FOR AATMANIRBHARTA

For Dhruv Walia, business analyst with a Pune-based digital marketing giant, self-reliance in technology is both an emotional and economic necessity, but also a distant goal. "There is pride and practicality in the call for Aatmanirbhar Bharat, but passion alone won't build platforms that can rival global giants," he says. "Most tech schools still train students on outdated systems. Despite having degrees, our youth have little problem-solving ability. They lack exposure and entrepreneurial skills. India has over 90 crore Internet subscribers. But our digital economy still revolves around UPI, food delivery and cab-hailing services."

Rajesh Sharma, Deputy Director (OL), South zone, ESIC, who is developing an app to promote the use of Hindi in official work, has a more optimistic view. "Many Indian companies are making a considerable effort," he says. "Look at Zoho. It is one of India's strongest tech success stories. It offers a full suite of office and business software, which is used worldwide. Its messaging app Arattai (Tamil for 'chat') is a potential alternative to WhatsApp. Zoho's model shows that global success and local roots can go hand in hand."

He adds that the popularity of Indian shopping apps like Myntra and Nykaa and fintech leaders like PhonePe and Paytm are signs of a thriving *desi* digital ecosystem. "The foundation is ready," Sharma says.

SHOULD INDIA COPY CHINA'S MODEL?

Growar is clear that China's model isn't one to copy. "China built its own apps under tight state control and Internet restrictions. It may look self-sufficient, but it comes at the cost of openness and choice," he says. "India should build strength from within through innovation and fair competition, not censorship."

Sharma agrees and adds, "Our democratic spirit is our biggest advantage. The goal should be open self-reliance. The aim is to attract users by quality, not compel them by restrictions."

THE ROAD AHEAD

So where does this leave us? If India gets this right, it can cut its reliance on foreign tech platforms. The numbers are in its favour. Digital payments are expected to hit ₹593 trillion by FY29 and the country's startup ecosystem continues to climb global rankings.

The dream isn't far-fetched. Still, one can't help but wonder if India has already missed the bus? Maybe. But perhaps the window isn't fully closed. Maybe, the next big app with a global footprint will have a *desi* signature after all.

And this brings us to you. If a homegrown app offers the same features and reliability as Facebook or Instagram, will you make the switch?

For actor Kirti Kulhari, independent cinema promises the perfect recipe for shattering stereotypes and lending new dimensions to characters

SUKANT DEEPAK

WHENEVER a new role comes her way, there is only one thing that actor Kirti Kulhari trusts — her instinct. She feels things seldom go wrong if one has the ear to listen to the faint whisper of the gut.

For someone who made her acting debut with 'Kichdi: The Movie' in 2010, and was later seen in films like 'Shaitan', 'Pink', 'Uri: The Surgical Strike', OTT outings like 'Four More Shots Please!', 'Criminal Justice', and 'Human', and now the independent movie 'Full Plate', written and directed by Tannishtha Chatterjee, a diverse representation of characters is extremely important.

"I do not want to be boxed. I do not want to be predictable. I do not want to play safe. What is the point if the audience or directors can second-guess my character's reaction? And not just for others — it is important that I shock myself with each role. I guess that is what keeps an actor essentially alive," stresses Kulhari.

The actor, whose latest film 'Full Plate' was recently screened at the Dharamshala International Film Festival (DIFF) and won the Visionary Director Award at the 2025 Busan International Film Festival, insists that working on the film reminded her of her theatre days, as the director, Tannishtha Chatterjee work-shopped extensively and believed in rehearsals before takes. The film explores the personal, professional, and marital challenges of Kulhari's character as she uses her culinary skills for a new job, leading to tensions with her husband and family.

The movie also addresses multiple issues, including patriarchy, prejudice, and changing roles within the household.

Adding that independent films with directors willing to go the extra mile offer a wider canvas to actors who like to experiment, Kulhari states, "Considering these films are never just about the box office, there is always this commitment towards excellence in each department, thus pushing you to challenge yourself consistently and offer newer perspectives to the characters. As an actor, I look for stories and teams that offer this potential — you can grow only outside the comfort zone. There is little point in doing work that will give you just temporary fame and money — but then that is a personal view," she adds.

As the conversation veers towards her process, she makes it clear that it is not 'method' that she follows. Believing in taking a deep dive into the character's soul and then quickly coming to the surface once the director shouts 'cut', Kulhari, citing examples of 'Criminal Justice' and 'Full Plate', smiles, "I admit that there is always a fear of the darkness coming back to me, latching on to me... the reason why I like to quickly get inside and then divorce the character between takes."

The key, she adds, is to read and discuss the scenes with the director multiple times in order to reach the subtext, as it is between the dialogues where the performance finds a place, and where the real magic lies.

All for intimate festivals like DIFF being organised in Tier-2 cities, the actor feels that it is important not to underestimate the audiences in these cities. "Why restrict good cinema only to the metros? Besides giving an opportunity to filmmakers and actors to interact with the audience, it is also a great platform to listen to emerging voices."

ACTION ON THE EDGE



Kirti Kulhari's latest film 'Full Plate' won the Visionary Director Award at the 2025 Busan International Film Festival.

The actor feels that over the years, there has been a constant blurring of lines between mainstream and independent cinema. "Considering the very diverse set of audiences during a festival, it is not hard to admit that it is we who have projected our discrimination onto the audience. It is high time we take a step back and let the audience expose themselves to art without strict silos," she opines.

Kulhari feels that four years of doing theatre before she entered films have shaped her as an actor who can think for herself, and offer more than what directors expect her to deliver as theatre as a medium prepares you for everything — physically, mentally and spiritually. "The long rehearsal days, continuous shows, and direct interactions with audiences ensure that you emerge well-rounded. Not to mention, the knowledge of departments other than acting," she states.

Hoping that there is a greater support system and a more vibrant ecosystem to

sustain independent cinema in the country, the actor feels that considering the fact that over the years, the country has produced some remarkable films which have won top honours at prestigious film festivals across the globe, there should be no doubt in anyone's mind about the potential of young Indian directors.

"Everybody needs to come together in support — the government, distributors, and audiences. A few small steps can open floodgates of opportunity — adequate finance, an intact distribution system and screenings at multiplexes, etc."

As the fourth season of 'Four More Shots Please!' gets set to release in January, Kulhari, who has just finished another film and is looking forward to the release of one in the middle of next year, concludes, "Let's hope in the coming years, I can work with filmmakers who do not hold back and are committed to telling stories from the soil in their unique cinematic language."

— The writer is a freelance contributor

CAPTION CONTEST 1535

HIMANSHU MAHAJAN



Entries are invited to suggest a caption for the photograph. The captions should only be in English, witty and not exceeding 10 words, and reach Spectrum, The Tribune, Chandigarh, 160030, by Thursday. The best five captions will be published and awarded ₹300, ₹250, ₹200, ₹150 and ₹100, respectively. Each caption must be accompanied by a clipping of the caption contest and its number. Photocopies or scans of the caption photo won't be accepted. Online subscribers may attach an epaper clipping at captionpics@tribunemail.com or a scanned copy of the epaper clipping. Please mention the pin code and phone number, along with your address.

SELECTED ENTRIES FOR CAPTION CONTEST 1534



SPECTRUM NOVEMBER 2 ISSUE (SEE PHOTO)

Right Hand Drive — Pardeep Bhatta, Ambala Cantt

All-weather shield — Sanju Panicker, Panchkula

A single-handed show — SP Chopra, Panchkula

Handles in both hands — Sandeep Daniel, Shimla

Rainbow overhead — Rajinder Bansal via epaper, Kamal



FOOD TALK
PUSHPESH PANT

IN popular mind, tomato rice is associated with the South Indian — Tamil, Kannadiga and Telugu — versions prepared with curry leaves and tempered with chillies (whole red dry and green), fenugreek and mustard seeds. It is a purely vegetarian dish.

Imagine our surprise when we came across a Persian staple that goes by the name of *Dami-e Goje Farangi*. *Dami* translates as rice and *Goje Farangi* is what the tomatoes were called when they first reached Iran and India. The Bengalis still call them *Vilayati Baigun*.

What is even more interesting is that the *Tamato Na Chawal Ne Murg* is a non-vegetarian delicacy that can be easily mastered and prepared at home. Lots of warm spices are used that subtly impart heat to the body and help it combat the creeping chill of early winter. But if you do not like the idea of adding fowl or flesh to steamed rice, you can enjoy a *shuddh shakahari* ver-

Tomato rice with chicken can be easily prepared and mastered at home

sion by cooking the rice in vegetable broth and adding vegetarian proteins like *paneer* or *tofu* to the gravy. Our suggestion is that do not combine *makhani paneer* with this subtly aromatic and mildly flavourful *parsi* dish.

Before we conclude, we must acknowledge our debt to the wonderful cookbook Niloufer Mavalvala has come out with. It is titled 'The Route to Parsi Cooking: From Pars to India and Beyond'. Endorsed by the musical genius Zubin Mehta, it is beautifully photographed and printed very lavishly. This is where we stumbled upon this unusual alluring recipe. This work reminds us how much the cuisine of Hindustan owes to this minuscule minority that came to India to escape religious persecution hundreds of years ago.

The Parsi recipes dating back to pre-Islamic Iran have a very different signature from the Persian recipes imported during the Mughal period.

— The writer is a food historian

Parsi flavours on your plate

TAMATO NA CHAWAL NE MURGI

INGREDIENTS

FOR CHICKEN BROTH

Chicken (skin removed, cut in large pieces)	1 kg
Onions (peeled, sliced fine)	500 gm
Whole red chilli dry	3-4
Ginger paste	1 tsp
Garlic paste	1 tsp
Salt	1 tsp
Oil	6 tbsp
Water	4 cups

FOR TOMATO GRAVY

Tomatoes (fresh, chopped)	3 cups
Sugar	2 tsp
Garlic cloves	4
Cinnamon stick	1x2 inch piece
Black peppercorns	8-10
Sugar	2 tsp
Ginger (diced)	1 tsp
Flour	2 tbsp
Mint fresh (chopped fine)	1/2 cup

FOR THE RICE

Rice	2 1/2 cups
Tomato gravy (see recipe)	1 1/2 cups
Chicken broth (see recipe)	2 cups
Cinnamon stick	1x2 inch piece
Salt	1/2 tsp
Chilli powder	1/2 tsp
Oil	4 tbsp

METHOD

■ **Preparing the broth:** Take a thick-bottomed pan, add oil. When hot, put in the onions. When these turn golden brown, add the chicken and continue cooking on medium flame till the chicken is well browned. Put in all the remaining ingredients. Stir-fry, then pour in the water. Bring to a boil, reduce flame and simmer till the chicken is almost cooked but is not falling from the bones. Sieve through a soup mill to separate the chicken pieces and the stock. Divide the broth into two equal parts, one to cook the rice and other for use in the tomato gravy.

■ **For the tomato gravy:** Put everything in a pot, except the flour. Reduce heat to medium and cook covered for 15 minutes, uncovering and stirring occasionally. Dry roast the flour on a griddle. Add to the pot in which the tomato gravy is being prepared. Add cooked chicken to the tomato gravy and simmer for about 30 minutes. Pour half of the tomato gravy and half of the chicken broth to the pot, whisk well to blend and cook until the desired thickness is obtained.

■ **Parboil the rice** in salted boiling water, drain and keep aside. Heat oil in a pan and put in the cinnamon, chilli powder and salt, stirring briskly for 15 seconds before adding the rice. At this stage, pour in the reserved tomato gravy and chicken stock. Bring to boil and let the liquid evaporate. When bubbles appear on the surface, place a thin moist cloth on top of the cooking rice (similar to when cooking *dum biryani*) and cover the pot tightly with the lid. Continue cooking on very low heat for about 20 minutes. To serve, plate it using a mould if you like, pour the gravy on top or in the hollow and place chicken pieces on the side.





BLIND DATE

AFTER graduating from design school, I set off with curiosity as my compass — and a camera never far from reach. Over the past four decades, I've lived and worked across many places, and cultures. Wherever I landed, I found myself drawn to the quiet patterns of daily life — the way people live, move, connect, worship, celebrate, survive. Photography became my way of making sense of it all.

Each frame was a pause — a moment to notice the common threads that run through us, no matter where we are. Sure, every place had its own vibe, its own shifting energy. But beneath the surface, the stories were always human. And through the lens, I learned to see both the sameness and the difference — not as contradictions, but as layers of the same beautiful tale.

I first photographed Manhattan in 1990. The city had a bite to it: sharp, vibrant, restless, always moving. After working in Mumbai, the chaos here felt



Rajeev Manikoth

oddly familiar. Different skins, different streets, but the same undercurrent — people grinding through the noise, chasing time, dodging life's punches, just trying to make it through. Strip away the surface, and it's the same story on both sides of the world. Sure, the accents

were different, the clothes and mannerisms too — but the rhythm was the same.

That was the age of analog — film was expensive and every frame was precious. I picked up a used Nikon FM from a street vendor, paired it with a 24mm lens, and hit the streets.

Almost every shot here was taken blind, camera slung low at my hip. I wasn't aiming for perfection, I wanted truth. A raw, ground-level look at the city as it was, not how it wanted to be seen.

I wanted honesty — unfiltered glimpses of life, seen from the street level, the way it unfolds when no one's watching. These images are fragments of that world: blurred edges, fleeting glances, stories caught mid-step.

These images don't pose. These are snatched seconds from a city that never slows down.

— **Rajeev Manikoth** is a designer with specialisation in Visual Communication from NID, Ahmedabad. These images, along with his works on Goa and Kottiyoor, are on display at Museo Camera, Gurugram

Expressions of defiance

MONICA ARORA

"Water does not resist. Water flows. When you plunge your hand into it, all you feel is a caress. Water is not a solid wall, it will not stop you. But water always goes where it wants to go, and nothing in the end can stand against it. Water is patient. Dripping that, my child. Remember you are half water. If you can't go through an obstacle, go around it. Water does."

— Margaret Atwood, 'The Penelopiad'

THE exhibition 'Weaving Water: Feminine Countercultures in Paint and Print' is a reminder of the ability of women to adopt and adapt to the myriad roles of life, be it of a mother, daughter, wife, beloved, sister and more. The show — at the India International Centre in New Delhi — is anchored in Punjabi writer Ajeet Cour's 'Weaving Water: An Autobiography'. Published over 40 years ago, it won her the

'Weaving Water: Feminine Countercultures in Paint and Print' celebrates women in art and literature

Sahitya Akademi Award in 1985.

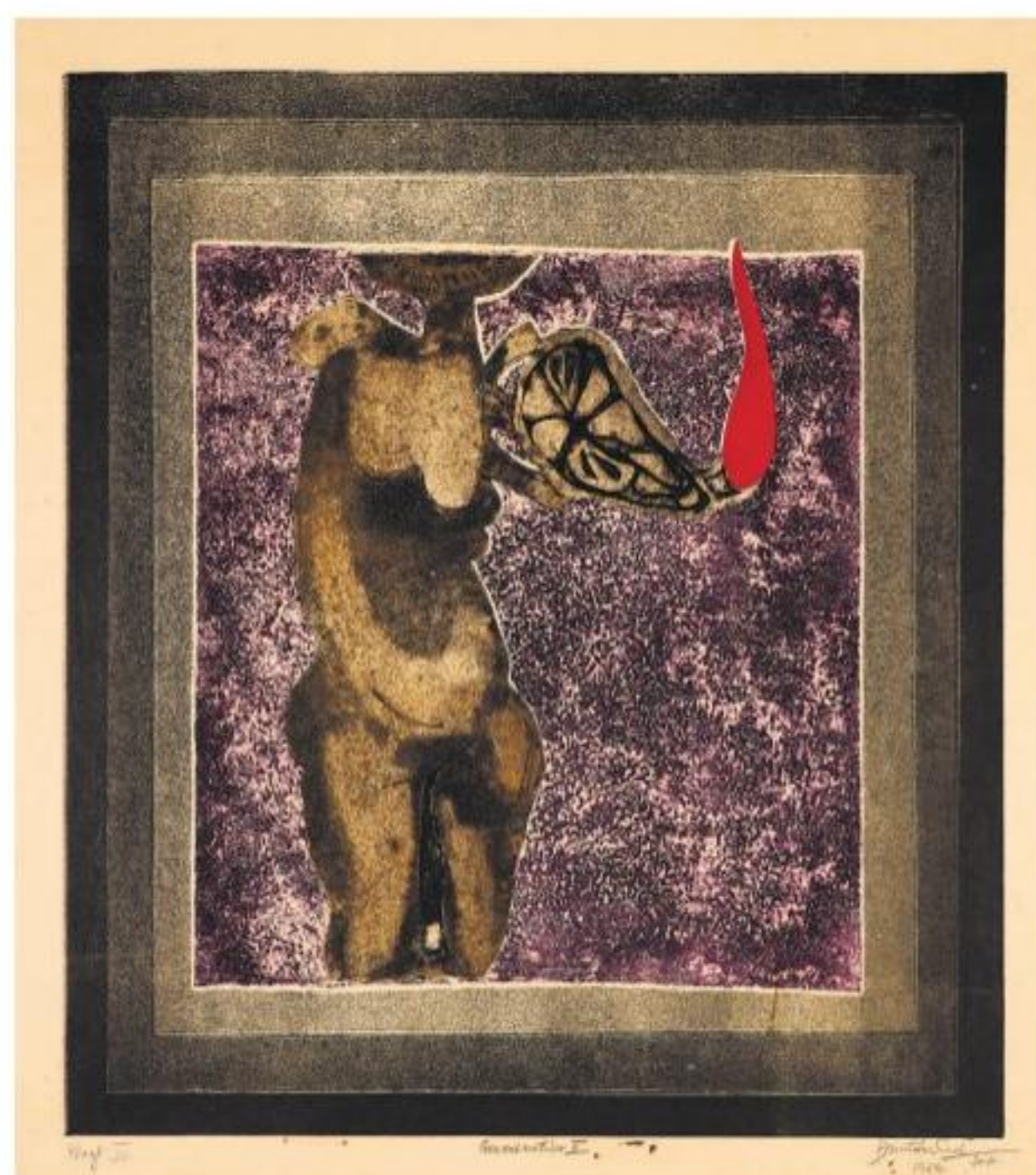
Curator Jyoti A Kathpalia presents this multimedia show by juxtaposing works of eminent women artists having a unique voice and distinct oeuvre. As Kathpalia says, "Refusing the life of prescribed femininity and prohibitions, the writer and artists redefine the feminine as desiring, strong and fearless, setting forth a counterculture of feminine for countless other women. The exhibition explores these feminine countercultures articulated by women who dare to speak and act, to imagine and express beyond constraint, and to weave a new expression of freedom and becoming."

Eminent artist Arpana Caur, Ajeet's daughter, casts an ethereal gaze towards the quintessential strength of feminine energy in her work 'Earth and Sky', while 'The River of Blood' depicts the folktale of Sohni-Mahiwal and how socio-cultural biases afflict even the purity of selfless love.

Renowned artist Jayasri Buman's 'Jeevan Nadi' features motifs of water bodies and rivers — swans, mermaids, moons, mythical creatures and more — in a monochromatic palette, with life or jeevan merging in a rhythm with the nadi or river, that is a metaphor for the feminine.

Ajeet's fiery writing finds resonance in Gogi Saroj Pal's 'Nirbhaya' series and Vasudha Thozhur's 'Portrait of Shah Jehan' — both address rape as an outcome of gender politics. The stark-naked image of defiance in Gogi's work carries a sickle against the pressures of appropriate dressing and behaviour.

Bula Bhattacharya's series of hand-painted silk screen prints, 'Role Playing',



(Clockwise from above) 'Germination II', Anupam Sud; from 'Nirbhaya' series, Gogi Saroj Pal; Manmeet Devgun's performance on female infanticide.



'Tales of Soul and Womb' by Durga Kainthola.



has words inscribed across surfaces, while Shivani Aggarwal's teakwood, acrylic and epoxy sculptures in 'Knowing and Unknowing' pose a question on pseudo-intellectualism. In 'Weaving Traps, Edition II', she has woven a crochet piece as a representation of the fragility of unfulfilled dreams of women.

Similarly, Shubhika Lal's wearable sculpture, 'Internal Landscape... Spaces Between Holding Memories', is akin to a handstitched dress that embodies the woman, while Hemavathy Guha conjures women communities so evocatively in 'Cornered'. Aradhna Tandon shows the gentle demeanour of women in harmony with nature; Kanchan Chander's 'Warning' and 'Silence Speaks When Words Can't' carry forth this duality of female strengths and vulnerabilities.

Aparna Anand Singh's 'Silent Storm' and Shubhika Lal's other installation, 'Breaking

Shackles', symbolise an urge to reassess the power of shattering proverbial shackles.

The life of the resilient Ajeet Cour is reinterpreted by Durga Kainthola's portraits while Nitasha Jaini's floor installation is a glimpse into the author's biography, with renditions from her life story. 'Khanabadosh I', a wall installation, is a commentary on the marginalisation of women in a patriarchal world.

Anupam Sud's 'The Sunset' puts the spotlight on the ageing body of women, while 'Germination II' tries to peer into the emotions, desires, yearnings and instincts that constrain the women all across the world.

Of special mention is artist Manmeet Devgun's evocative performance 'Ghara', based on female infanticide. As she elucidates, "It was inspired by Ajeetji's book. The work talks about burrowing, digging and excavating personnel terrains. Some

experiences are lived, some gathered. There are stories we all have lived in different decades, yet there are similarities as if these existed in the same timeline. The performance was an attempt to understand these shared terrains."

What weaves together this melange of artworks — sculptures, paintings, installations, films, words and performances — courtesy such a seminal line-up of women artists, is the bold autobiography 'Weaving Water'. Ajeet's personal life journey is an inspiration for women on how despite adverse circumstances, success is about the passion and dedication towards one's work. The indomitable Ajeet Cour opines: "Self-confidence is the keyword. I was a single parent but defied all adversities... I don't know where the strength came from."

The show is on view till November 10.

— **The writer is a freelance contributor**

BOOKS

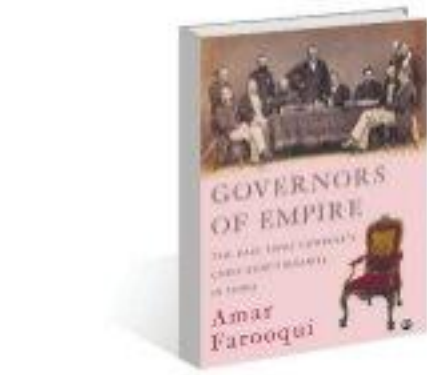
Company India kept, paid the price

SALIL MISRA

THE East India Company (EIC) was an extremely unusual phenomenon, twice over. It was a trading company that employed not just managers and manufacturers, but also soldiers and bureaucrats. It maintained an army and fought many wars. It conquered territories and actually became a 'state' even while continuing to perform its commercial functions. But it was also an unusual state in that its political functions and the exercise of sovereignty were completely subordinated to economic motives. Such state systems were a rarity in pre-modern times. By now, we know how the EIC functioned and governed India. But how was the EIC governed? This is an important question answered by historian Amar Farooqui in his meticulously researched book.

'Governors of Empire' is a biographical account of the men who governed the East India Company and ruled India during the 18th-19th centuries. Through the individual accounts of men such as Robert Clive, Warren Hastings, Dalhousie and John Lawrence, the book tells the story of the EIC and its transformation from a mere trading company to the world's largest empire.

Granted a charter by the British Queen to trade with the East, the EIC landed first in Surat in 1608 and soon set up factories on both the east and west coasts of the Indian



GOVERNORS OF EMPIRE: THE EAST INDIA COMPANY'S CHIEF FUNCTIONARIES IN INDIA
by Amar Farooqui.
Aleph.
Pages 324.
₹999

peninsula. Parts of the western coast were already occupied by the Portuguese. In order to bypass them, the EIC went beyond and expanded to the southern tip and much of the eastern coast on the Bay of Bengal. It carved out the new cities of Madras, Bombay and Calcutta, out of clusters of villages and small islands. All this required war and violence. The EIC was engaged in wars with other European companies and also with local Indian rulers.

The world economy, till the 18th century, was still a zero-sum game. One could benefit only at the expense of the other. In such a condition, the dividing line between a legitimate economic activity such as trade and simple loot and plunder was obviously quite

thin. Private ships of the EIC obtained letters of reprisal from the Queen to legitimately attack and loot other ships of rival companies. Predation was an integral part of a successful economic venture.

However, in spite of wielding enormous wealth and power, the EIC remained a petitioning body to the mighty Mughal empire, at least till the mid-18th century. The British were at best pleaders in the Mughal court depending on the mercy of the emperor. The EIC enjoyed enormous wealth and power, but not sovereignty, which rested firmly with the Mughals. The EIC did try to take on the mighty Mughals in 1690 for control over Bombay and paid dearly for it. It lost the battle, surrendered to the Mughals and very nearly lost its place on the Indian shore. If the Company officials were not pardoned and allowed to carry on their commercial activities by the Mughal emperor, the EIC story in India might well have been over by the end of the 17th century. However, the balance of power began to shift gradually but decisively from the declining Mughals to the ascending British from the 18th century onwards. In the 19th century, it was quite clear who was the ruler of India.

It was only after the rebellion of 1857 that the pendulum of destiny swung decisively. In 1690, after the EIC lost the battle of Bombay, the Company's representatives were brought to the Mughal court as prisoners, their hands tied and heads low. After 1857, it

was the Mughal emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar and his family who became prisoners, for having led the rebellion. Zafar and his family were exiled to Burma, where they all died — unwept, and unsung. The control of India also passed from the hands of the EIC to the British Queen. But the Company officials continued to play important roles in governing India. One such official was John Lawrence, who had ordered the exile of Zafar.

Shortly after Lawrence died, his statue was erected in Lahore in 1887. It depicted Lawrence with a pen in his right hand and sword in the left. A caption said: "Will you be governed by the pen or the sword?" This was quite characteristic of the British rule, both under the EIC and the British crown. They ruled with the pen and generated new knowledge about Indian society. The Mughal rule was declared as alien and illegitimate. The British, by contrast, were declared benevolent and beneficial for India. But the sword was just as much at play, as was exemplified by the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in 1919.

This is an extremely important book on the Company's rule in India. It goes well beyond the big picture and provides minute details of individual activities, shifts in policy decisions, fluctuations in the fortunes of the East India Company and the eventual transfer of power from it to the Crown.

—The reviewer is a visiting faculty at BML Munjal University, Manesar

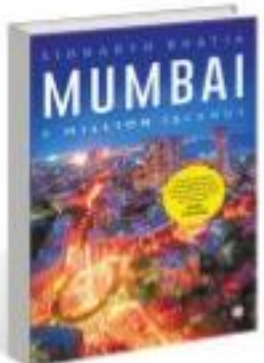


BACKFLAP



LOVE AND CRIME IN THE TIME OF PLAGUE
by Anuradha Kumar.
Speaking Tiger.
Pages 288, ₹499

A sequel to 'The Kidnapping of Mark Twain', her first Bombay Mystery, Anuradha Kumar's 'Love and Crime in the Time of Plague' is set in 1896. A ship docks in Bombay Harbour, and as the workers rush to unload the cargo, a scream rings out. A large black rat, frothing at the mouth, has bitten one of the men. As more inhabitants fall sick and die, the worst fear is confirmed — it is the plague. Efforts to deal with the disease scientifically are met with warning notes. And thus the mystery unravels.



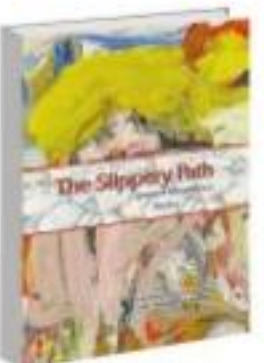
MUMBAI: A MILLION ISLANDS
by Sidharth Bhatia.
HarperCollins.
Pages 300, ₹599

As a native of Mumbai, the author has seen it constantly change over the years. What is vanishing is not just space, but memory, history and the very fabric of a living city. The city's famed spirit of survival is being tested like never before. Through this book, the author endeavours to map this rapid transformation and to see what the human cost of that is. He hopes the book will strike a chord with not just the citizens of Mumbai, but also with those in other cities where similar changes are taking place.



SHABAD: PUNJABI SHORT STORY ISSUE
Pages 152, ₹100

Aimed at taking Punjabi literature to readers of other languages, this special supplement by *Shabad* magazine features short stories by Punjabi writers from across the world over the last 60 years or so. The translators write that the stories represent different eras, regions and circumstances. "Each story has its own distinct theme and tone, offering a new glimpse into human experience." The writers featured include Ram Sarup Ankh, Gurdev Singh Rupana, Raghubir Dhand, Kirpal Kazak and Prem Gorki, among others.



THE SUPPER PATH
by Jinder.
Twentyfirst Century Publications.
Pages 206, ₹300

This book is an English translation of Punjabi writer Jinder's selected short stories. In the preface, translator Kuldeep Singh writes how his stories break away from the conventional forms of linear narration. "His characters often live unbalanced lives, caught as they are between self-realisation and social expectation... Through psychological portraits, symbolic narratives and spiritual undertones, Jinder depicts the intricate realities of modern existence."

Speaking truth to power

DEBASHISH MUKERJI

IT is almost an accepted truism today that the last 11 years of BJP rule have seen a steady shrinking of the democratic space in India, as well as a concerted effort to demonise the minority Muslim community. The only silver lining is that each incremental step taken in either of these directions has been doggedly resisted, though oftentimes in vain.

Among the most persistent resisters has been Rashtriya Janata Dal's Rajya Sabha MP Manoj Kumar Jha, through his speeches in Parliament and on other forums, as well as his writings. Some of those essays and speeches have now been compiled in this collection. The majority are responses to immediate developments. However, there are also a few essays on broader topics — the abomination that is manual scavenging, the absence of compassion in India's penal system, the distinction between 'government' and 'nation', which the current leadership is always seeking to blur; the crisis of motivation of the party cadre (in all parties) as professional agencies take over election campaigns, and more.

Particularly moving are the two 'Letters to Gandhi' — the first in the context of the lynchings, the second following the CAA being passed — which underline how Hindu intolerance is giving Jinnah's two-nation theory retrospective validation. Among the strongest is the one on the government's decision to include caste in the next census, perhaps the only occasion when Jha supports a BJP move! (No doubt, he also underlines the BJP's volte face on the matter — as late as April 2024, PM Modi had been mocking the demand, only to appropriate it in April 2025.)

Jha acknowledges that it is not only upper caste arch conservative forces that

oppose a caste census, but also some progressive liberals, and for valid reasons. His argument is irrefutable: if categories such as OBC, SC and ST are to exist at all (and no one can wish them away), how can special resources be allocated or quotas set for their uplift if the precise numbers of the castes they comprise are not known? It amounts to "flying blind!"

The longest essay is on coalition governments, which also serves as the book's title. Jha observes that for all the BJP's mocking of coalition governments as inherently unstable, the last three at the Centre — the NDA from 1999 to 2004 and the UPA, from 2004 to 2009 and again from 2009 to 2014 — completed their full terms. "Coalitions serve as a crucial safeguard against democratic erosion," he writes. "When parties are in a coalition, they cannot pursue extreme or anti-people policies unchecked."

Calling India a "civilisational coalition", he culls out instances starting as far back as the Vajji and Malla republics of 400-600 BCE, when governance was carried out through *ganasangas* or tribal assemblies.

Yet the post-1947 Indian coalitions could have been explored in greater depth. Why were the first few coalitions — at the Centre and in the states — such disasters, while the later ones were not? Equally important: how does the economic performance of coalitions stack up against that of single-party governments? Unfortunately, Jha veers off into recording instances of the BJP's misgovernance, which, while valuable as a record, do not increase our understanding of coalitions.

A number of Jha's assertions across various essays can certainly be contested. What cannot be is his vast erudition and the felicity of his writing. The essays are littered with relevant quotes. On quoting the poet Om Prakash Valmiki in Parliament, Jha notes that "poetry allows for the distillation of complex concepts into digestible morsels of wisdom, making the message accessible to a wider audience". Much the same can be said about Jha's writing (and speaking) style.

—The reviewer is the author of 'The Disruptor: How VP Singh Shook India'

Untold story of resilience

BILAL GANI

A PROFOUND exploration of collective memory, 'An Invisible Minority' puts the spotlight on the voices, struggles, and resilience of the Kashmiri Sikh community. A revised version of Komal JB Singh's doctoral dissertation at Jawaharlal Nehru University, the book provides a first-hand account of the displacement, violence and trauma experienced by the community through interviews, and by accessing archival records as well as literature.

"At present, Sikhs are the largest minority living in Kashmir and are therefore crucial to any understanding of the region," the author notes.

In popular discourse, Dogra ruler Gulab Singh is credited with establishing Jammu and Kashmir as an entity. However, it was Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the founder of the Lahore kingdom, who truly laid its foundation. Through rigorous research, the author establishes a narrative of state-building under the Sikhs. However, there are contested views regarding the period.

Many historians have documented that nearly half of Kashmir's population perished due to recurrent famines and inadequate healthcare facilities. The issue of oppressive taxation also crops up in several works on the rulers of the time — how local industries such as handicrafts and handlooms suffered, and artisans were forced into poverty and switched to other professions.

Despite their proactive role, Kashmiri Sikhs have remained largely underrepresented and insignificant in understanding Kashmir and its society. This book presents a new historiography of the conflict-ridden region by placing the Sikh community at the centre of history writing on the Valley.

The resilience of the Sikh community in the face of violence and persecution is evident from the fact that most Sikhs chose to remain in Kashmir even when Kashmiri Pandits left the Valley following the outbreak of armed insurgency in the late 1980s.

Amid the complex and contested identities of the region, this micro-minority has remained both neglected and invisible.



AN INVISIBLE MINORITY: THE HISTORY, SOCIETY AND POLITICS OF SIKHS IN KASHMIR
by Komal JB Singh.
Routledge.
Pages 196, ₹1,500

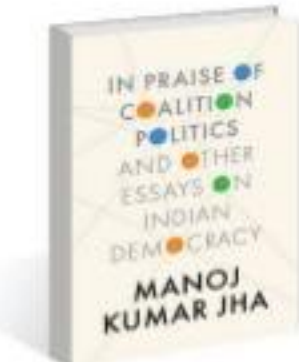
Singh's book attempts to restore the lost glory and identity of the community; it stands out as a groundbreaking ethnographic account of their experiences.

The author, quoting British travel historian Walter Lawrence, notes that "the Sikhs of Kashmir were not considered progressive and their socio-economic condition was also very weak". Yet, Kashmiri cultural practices became intrinsic to the Sikh community and significantly influenced their lifestyle and identity.

In the chapter 'The Partition of 1947 and the Sikhs of Kashmir', she presents a chilling account of the horrors of Partition and the mass killings along religious lines. Through interviews with survivors and relatives of victims, Singh documents how the Kashmiri Sikhs, as a vulnerable minority, were persecuted and uprooted during the tribal invasions and the communal violence that followed the British withdrawal from India. The author carefully details that despite targeted killings and marginalisation, the Sikhs of Kashmir have remained fearless and resilient.

As minority identities come under assault in India, this book becomes crucial for understanding how marginalisation and persecution endanger the survival of nation-states, and why protecting minorities is essential for building a truly democratic and powerful nation.

—The reviewer teaches at Government Degree College, Beerwah (J&K)



IN PRAISE OF COALITION POLITICS AND OTHER ESSAYS ON INDIAN DEMOCRACY
by Manoj Kumar Jha.
Speaking Tiger.
Pages 232, ₹499

Letters to Gandhi' — the first in the context of the lynchings, the second following the CAA being passed — which underline how Hindu intolerance is giving Jinnah's two-nation theory retrospective validation. Among the strongest is the one on the government's decision to include caste in the next census, perhaps the only occasion when Jha supports a BJP move! (No doubt, he also underlines the BJP's volte face on the matter — as late as April 2024, PM Modi had been mocking the demand, only to appropriate it in April 2025.)

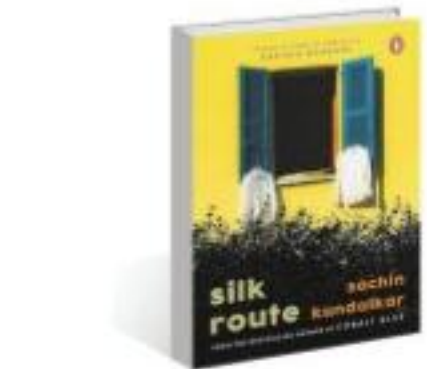
Jha acknowledges that it is not only upper caste arch conservative forces that

Soothing an ache that cannot be located

SONYA J NAIR

ON the first reading, Sachin Kundalkar's 'Silk Route', published in 2023 in Marathi as 'Monochrome: Volume 1, Reshim Marg', has great similarities with his 'Cobalt Blue' — the coming-of-age narrative, siblings in love with the same man, a search for the self and for meaning. Like 'Cobalt Blue', it gives memorable characters and an insight into the soul-crushing, mind-numbing ways that imagination dies in the Indian family. But, in retrospect, the divergences start to emerge.

We realise that Kundalkar has laid the foundations of a body of literature to which 'Silk Route' is the latest addition. The novel opens with the protagonist, Nishikant, stepping off a bus in a dusty village and realising he has forgotten the book he was reading — very tellingly, 'Giovanni's Room' by James Baldwin, about a young man navigat-



SILK ROUTE
by Sachin Kundalkar.
Translated by Aakash Karkare.
Penguin Random House.
Pages 120, ₹399

ing questions about his sexuality as he soaks himself in the heady atmosphere of Paris. Why he's in a village that is in the throes of an *ashram* becomes clear as the narrative unspools itself, unhurriedly.

Nishikant loves walking. As a child, he went walking all over the town and knew all

the shops in the order of their location. His father finally gets him a cycle so the family does not have to walk every time they go out with him. Nishikant feels an acute sense of loss as he has to cycle everywhere. "Now, everything would hurtle towards him — and then leave him — with great speed. He would not be able to loiter like he used to. Everything had to be experienced as quickly as possible. Nothing would linger."

These lines set the tone for the experiences to follow. We meet the men who occupy Nishikant's heart. There is Nikhil, the boy his sister is also in love with; Shiv, who he meets as a student; and, finally, Srinivas in London. Years roll by and Nishikant is at yet another phase of life, having outlived tragedy, disappearances and separations.

'Silk Route' carries a distinct charm and depth of feeling. The novel spans lives, cultures, processes of thought. There is a sense of ease with which Kundalkar, through his translator Aakash Karkare,

brings alive this world with its overgrown branches, and trees looking to trap people with their flowers.

At its heart, 'Silk Route' is a queer love story where the arcs of various characters converge to tell the world to finally accept that 'love is love'. Everyone is searching for something. Sometimes they find it; sometimes they have to let it go. All this is dealt with the softness and beauty of an ocean wave lapping at the shore.

Nishikant, who journeys from place to place, returns to the tap in front of his dilapidated, abandoned family home to fill his bottles. He drinks from them on special occasions. The water is what feeds him, nourishes him and keeps his soul rooted.

Reading 'Silk Route' is like soothing an ache that cannot be located. It is to touch what is intangible and to feel a strange mix of compassion and sorrow.

—The reviewer teaches at All Saints' College, Thiruvananthapuram

REFLECTIONS

Why the future is feminine

AI has arrived, what's the point of living?



MEGHNA PANT

If there's one word that will define 2025, it's *women*. Not as a label or a cause, but as an unstoppable force reshaping every field — from sport to startups, from storytelling to leadership. Everywhere you look, women are no longer waiting to be invited to the table. They are building their own, often on their own terms.

Kiran Manral's new book *'The Game Changers'* arrives right at the cusp of this shift. It's not a feminist call to arms or a glossy self-help guide. It's a mirror — held up to the messy, magnificent, multi-tasking Indian woman who refuses to fit into a box. She is ambitious yet empathetic, exhausted yet unyielding, flawed yet unflinching. And in that contradiction lies her quiet revolution.

Consider women's cricket. Once dismissed as a novelty, it has become impossible to ignore. Packed stadiums, endorsement deals, live telecasts — it's not just a sporting moment, it's a cultural one. When the Indian women's team won, the triumph reverberated far beyond the boundary. It told every girl that the bat and the briefcase, the pitch and the boardroom, are all fair game.

With her new book, Manral captures the moment women have stopped asking for permission — to lead, to play, to build, to simply be. She draws a sharp, almost poetic, parallel between the women who play and the women who build. The cricketer and the entrepreneur share the same DNA: both have had to fight for visibility, credibility, and access to opportunity. Both have faced scepticism disguised as advice. And both, in their own quiet way, are redrawing the map of aspiration.

But what makes Manral's writing powerful is that she refuses to paint these women as superheroes. She doesn't romanticise their struggle or sanctify their success. She knows revolutions rarely come with banners and hashtags. They unfold in kitchens, in WhatsApp groups, in cramped offices and late-night commutes. They take shape when a woman asks for a pay raise, when she walks out of a bad marriage, when she starts a business from her bedroom. They are built on the everyday courage of choosing oneself.

Women don't need saving or spotlighting anymore. They need space — to play, to fail, to rise

Reading Manral, I am reminded of how the modern Indian woman doesn't want to be glorified or victimised — she just wants to be seen. She can lead a meeting and forget her child's tiffin. She can smash a century and still check in on her parents. Her power lies not in perfection but in persistence. Her feminism is not angry — it's pragmatic, lived, and often laced with humour.

The women of 2025 aren't asking to "lean in" to systems built for men. They are redesigning those systems entirely. They're rejecting the old hierarchies that celebrated burnout and bravado, the super-woman, and offering a new template grounded in empa-

thy, adaptability, and collaboration. The traits once dismissed as "soft" are now the ones saving businesses, democracies, and relationships.

This is what Manral calls the "feminine future". It's not about flipping the patriarchy and placing women at the top — it's about rebuilding power itself. It's about leading without ego, nurturing without guilt, winning without cruelty. It's about saying no without apology.

And that's why her book feels like the story of our times. It's a chronicle of women who no longer fit neatly into stereotypes: the homemaker who invests in a startup, the founder who becomes a mother on her own terms, the athlete who turns down a movie deal to mentor the next generation. These are the women who will define this decade.

In a culture obsessed with external validation, there's something radical about being enough for yourself. That, ultimately, is Manral's message. Women don't need saving. They don't need spotlights. They just need space — to play, to fail, to rebuild, to thrive.

The shift is everywhere if you know where to look: in the startup founder disrupting industries; in the athlete winning hearts; in the storyteller like Manral herself, who is documenting the zeitgeist with a mix of mischief and gravitas. Together, they form the mosaic of modern India — a country finally learning to see its women not as symbols or slogans, but as forces of transformation.

Women don't just represent the future, they are the future. And in 2025, that future is already here — fearless, funny, and unapologetically feminine.

Because the future isn't female — it's *feminine*. And that's what makes it so revolutionary.

— The writer is an acclaimed author



AVAY SHUKLA

At nearly 75 years, I have for long endorsed Bob Hope's dictum: *"I'm not afraid of dying but I don't want to be around when it happens."* But, of late, I am more inclined to go with *"Death, where is thy sting?"* by the Apostle Paul, in *1 Corinthians* of the *New Testament*. The simple reason is that I can no longer cope with the tectonic changes taking place in a world where AI means Artificial Intelligence and not the more familiar Artificial Insemination people of my generation were used to.

I've always been scientifically challenged: in school, I thought a light year was one when you didn't get any homework for the vacations, and even as a grown-up, I am convinced that the reason I can't get out of bed in the morning is because of Newton's First Law: a body at rest will continue to be at rest unless acted upon by an external force. That external force is Neerja, which only proves my point (and Newton's). I guess what I'm trying to convey is that I lack the knowledge to make any sense of technological "progress".

For example, I cannot figure out what has happened to my email — I no longer receive mails from ladies. I discovered this the other day: someone, or something, has installed malware in my laptop which automatically filters out all mails sent by females. It could be Neerja, or it could be Trump with his misogynistic brain, but the point is: what the hell am I supposed to do? And what's next — will they also filter mails from homosexuals, lesbians (sorry, they're already out), my editors, anti-bhaktis, Mani Shankar Aiyar and Kangana Ranaut? If so, then what's the point of going on living?

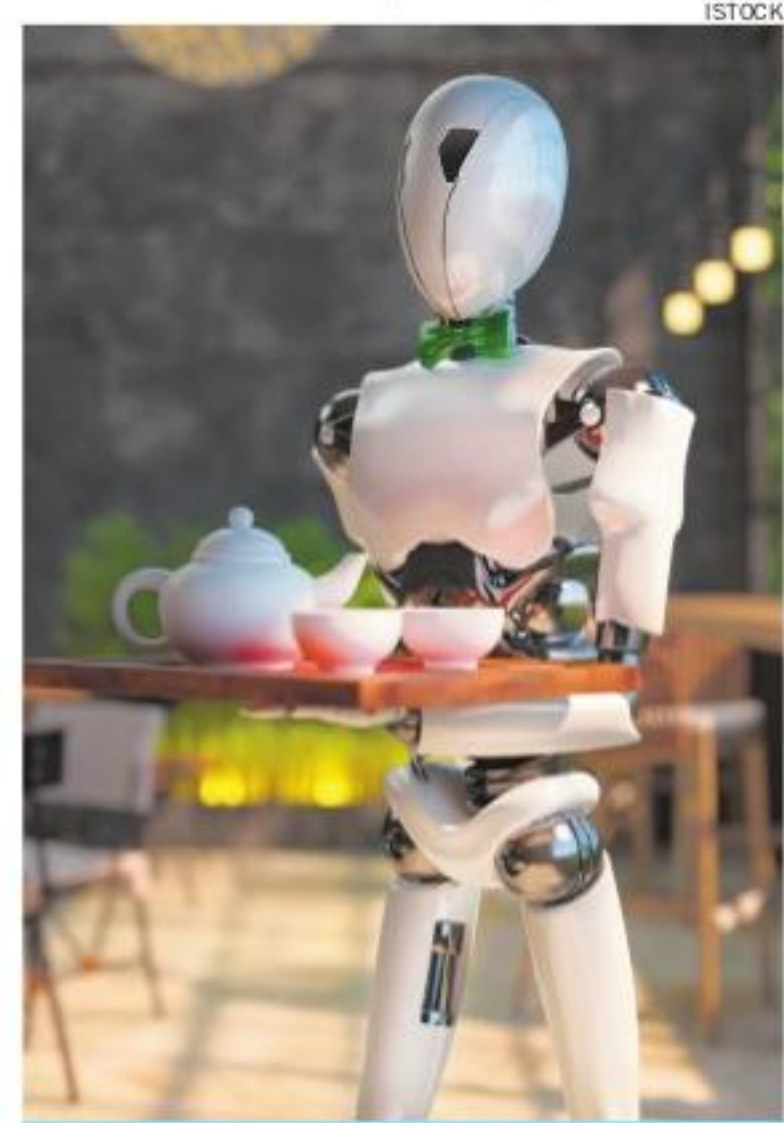
I can't wrap my head around this Artificial Intelligence and robotic thingy either; compared to Trumpian and *"andh-bhakt"* intelligence, it's a god-given gift and we should be welcoming it. But I believe it's wiping out millions of jobs, and that the time is not far off when we will be to robots what dogs are to us — loyal, but totally confused.

The optimists tell us that AI will delete jobs but will create new ones, but the problem is no one can tell which jobs it will create. Bill Gates recently said in an interview that only three types of jobs will remain — energy sector related, biological sciences and coding for AI itself. For us non-techie types, most of whom swarm the IAS, the only remaining jobs will be that of horse whisperers, dog walkers, tarot card readers and *vaastu* planners. There will be no re-employment after retirement either.

Of course, Gates missed out on one job that will survive against all odds — politicians. They are a mutant sub-species of *homo sapiens* known as *homo crapiens*. Unlike the former,

they did not emerge from Africa but from the cesspools that were the inevitable result of apes descending from the trees and living in groups. They evolved slowly over the last 5,000 years or so, gradually losing their vmPFC (ventromedial prefrontal cortex), which enables us to have a conscience and moral sense of right and wrong. This is precisely what the AI robots also lack; consequently, there is no difference between *homo crapiens* and AI. Which is why AI will never replace politicians. Mr Gates might like to make a note of this.

And things are soon going to get whackier. In a few years, we shall be able to opt for designer babies with Einstein's beauty and Kangana Ranaut's brains, who will probably be home delivered by Blinkit;



AI is wiping out millions of jobs, and the time is not far off when we will be to robots what dogs are to us — loyal, but totally confused

women will be eternally safe because their nether garments shall henceforth be password protected or have facial recognition features embedded in them; a new species of *homo sapiens* will emerge — cybernetic nerds — which will be a blend of human bodies and AI chips (Donald Trump may be a prototype).

Astrologers will go extinct because ChatGPT will now predict your future — not a difficult job, because the said future will be the same for just about everybody except the multi-billionaires. Nobody will have a job, no one will be married because the female bots will be far more attractive than the female of our species. No one will die of old age, everyone shall die of boredom and ennui because there will be nothing for them to do except to listen to *Mann Ki Baat*.

I'm ready to walk into the sunset, folks, even if it is AI-generated.

— The writer is a retired IAS officer

The power of meditation



UNIVERSE

AMRIT BOLARIA

In today's world, we are caught in a relentless race chasing the next goal, the next raise, the next upgrade. A better lifestyle, fatter pay cheques, endless to-do lists — the pursuit never ends. In the process, we often forget ourselves. Anxiety, addictive patterns, deep-rooted pain, and self-destructive habits begin to take over. This is the point where meditation starts to make sense.

Imagine a state so profound that thought ceases, desire vanishes, and even the sense of "I" dissolves, leaving pure, luminous awareness.

Meditation opens a door to a state of No-Mind — a state where the mind ceases to function and opens into the supernatural space, the domain of pure awareness.

If one wants to live a life of clarity and direct knowing — free from pain, confusion, and unfulfilled effort — then meditation is the key. It is not something to do; it is a way to be. For only in stillness does the real reveal itself.

The benefits of meditation reveal themselves gently — through body and mind. Modern science now confirms what the ancient seers knew intuitively. As practice deepens, measurable physiological and neurological shifts appear. Meditation calms the nervous system, slows the breath and heart rate, and lowers blood pressure. By releasing endorphins, it restores hormonal balance, easing stress, anxiety, and depression.

According to the dictionary, the word 'meditate' means to engage in contemplation or reflection. Yet the contemplation that leads to meditation is not forced — it is effortless.

Convinced that there was more to human living than the simple desires of hunger, attachment, ambition, and sex, the sages set out in search of the unseen essence that governed the inner and outer worlds. They asked: What

caused thoughts to arise? What made them feel happy at times and unhappy at others? Why could they not control their destiny and the outcomes of their lives? Why did the rain not fall when they needed it most?

Burdened by these questions, they withdrew into forests to sit in quiet contemplation — away from external disturbances and social obligations. Here, through trial and error, through deep study, and finally through supernatural interventions, they discovered what lay beyond the veil of the mind.

While treading this path, they uncovered simple yet powerful ways of breathing, watching, looking, listening, and simply being.

These techniques they shared and documented for others who desired to walk the same path.

It is not something to do; it is a way to be. For only in stillness does the real reveal itself

The techniques or methods — or "tools", as they are more simply termed — varied from one person to another, depending on the state of their mind and body configuration. Focused attention, mindfulness, and *mantra* chanting are some examples of these techniques.

If one wishes to live beyond the mundane — beyond fluctuating emotions, helplessness, depression, anxiety, and stress — and wants to experience the supernatural within one's life, to heal the body, and to be the master of one's destiny by creating new experiences, then the answer lies in meditation.

As for how to meditate, the first imperative is to understand why you want to meditate, and what is the purpose of following this path. Once you understand this, let the thought go and begin with a blank mind.

Find a quiet and clean space, preferably where some fresh air is available — when you breathe in, you want to take in 'prana', life force or vital energy. Sit in a comfortable position. Remember to keep your spine straight. The important thing is to be comfortable. Your attention will be on your breath and you do not want to be shifting around.

Select a word that resonates with you. *Ram, Hari Om, Hare Krishna, Sat Naam, Wahe Guru, Allah Ho*. Take a simple, calm deep breath, which comes at its own pace until it reaches your navel. Breathing till the navel stops the chatter in your head, keeps you focused. Start chanting your chosen word (*shabad*), in a soft but audible tone. The ears must hear and the heart must feel the sound.

Choose a fixed time and place. You will soon notice the space itself begins to draw you back into practice.

— The writer has been on a spiritual journey for over two decades

Shimla's mahant of European descent, and monkey tales



RAAJA BHASIN

It had started off as the perfect hill station morning. A fairly clear sky, the welcome warmth of sunshine and for good measure, a gentle breeze that wafted around as if it had nothing better to do. With a group of elderly travellers, I was in Kasauli. (So as not to give offence to anyone, and to be as politically correct as anyone in these 'correctly incorrect' times, by 'elderly' I mean people of my age or a little younger).

We had just stepped out of the old church and one was recounting the story of the time when the Viceroy, John Lawrence, was asked to donate money to build the spire as the church still had no pews. Blunt as ever, he is believed to have remarked something to the effect: "Why would you get a man a hat,

when he had no trousers?" About that moment, a massive *langur* sitting on a wall, seemingly as content with life as anyone else, decided that I too did not need a spire. Nor benches for that matter. Just a floor would do. In a bound, he leapt and pushed me to the ground. A couple of painkillers took care of the bruises and other matters.

What lay totally battered was my ego and the supposed knowledge that *langur* monkeys are mild and do not attack, while the *rhesus macaque* is aggressive and attacks.

Over the following weeks, I spoke to friends who know more about monkey business than I do. A couple of simple and fairly obvious answers emerged, the man-animal conflict being the most apparent one. Then came the nuances of how animal behaviour is altering. The macaque, our common *bhandar*, once shied away from the larger and more formidable *langur*. The latter on a leash found employment of sorts, to keep the *bhandar* log away. Large bill boards of a *langur* with bared fangs can be seen outside some government offices in New Delhi. These, I understand, are meant to scare off only the tree-climbing monkeys who may find their way into the

offices and with ruthless efficiency demolish files, furniture and other available destructibles. Today, they forage, arm in arm, through rubbish heaps and over fruit trees.

Of the many unusual characters to come out of Shimla, one was Charles William de Russet. While one is not sure of his level of cordiality with *langurs*, he was known to be able to communicate with macaques. Charles studied at Shimla's Bishop Cotton School and it is believed that it was after his father's death that he drifted away from Christianity and joined the *fakir* at Jakhu. Expectedly, this conversion of sorts created a minor furore. George Ryall, a judge of Shimla's Small Cause Court, called him and tried to reason with the 18-year-old to "return to

his own people". Ryall spoke kindly but "Charlie was determined to stick to his role".

Russet is believed to have undergone the severe rigours of a novice for two years. He lived under a tree and the attendant who brought him food was his only human contact. John C Oman, a professor of natural science at Government College, Lahore, met him in 1894, and recorded: "Judging from outward appearances, the man had not suffered any such physical inconveniences as would affect his health, and he was particularly well clothed, though not in any *sadhu* style I have ever seen."

In time, Russet became known as Baba Mast Ram. He was something of a curiosity for Shimla's European residents and known as 'the leopard *fakir*' on account of the leopard skin he wore. He soon came to be accepted into priesthood and became a venerated figure.

Written by Babu Balgobind, a booklet appeared on his death: *'The Life and Teachings of Baba Mast Ram'*. The teachings were simple and Russet found parallels between Jesus and Krishna and Arjuna and John. The rest of the little volume was on the 10

avatars of Bhagwan Vishnu. A mention in 1925 says that "he occupied a temple in Chhota Simla". This last was at least a phase in Russet's life. The story goes that when Raja Daljit Singh of Kapurthala purchased Strawberry Hill, just below Chhota Simla, in 1921, Mast Ram occupied a room in the servants' quarters. The Raja allowed him to stay on. An apocryphal tale is added to this, that the Raja was disgusted with the destructiveness of the monkeys and his son, Padamjit Singh, who was still a child, "spoke to" Russet, who "persuaded" the monkeys to stay away from Strawberry Hill — and for several years, the simian bands would sit on the boundary wall but not enter the estate.

In June 1927, with the rare approval of the local Hindu assemblies, the Hindu hill chiefs and Hindu residents of Shimla, Russet was appointed *mahant*, manager and guardian of the temple dedicated to Hanumanji at Jakhu. He died on December 28 the same year and was cremated near the temple. In India, Charles de Russet is, perhaps, the only person of European descent to have become the *mahant* of a Hindu temple.

— The writer is an author based in Shimla

Charles William de Russet came to be known as Baba Mast Ram, and was a venerated figure

FAIR PLAY

DEEPAKAR SHARDA

IN January 2018, while talking to Bollywood star Shah Rukh Khan, also the co-owner of Kolkata Knight Riders, former Indian women's cricket team captain Mithali Raj had a simple comment: "Cricket is not gender-biased. If male cricketers deserve all the facilities, why can't women get equal attention?"

We don't know what Shah Rukh said to her, but last week when Indian skipper Harmanpreet Kaur quietly handed over the World Cup trophy the team had just won to Mithali — now a commentator — the two women looked at each other for a brief second before their emotions took over. The significance of the moment was not lost on the two cricket stars, nor anyone conversant with the long and arduous journey of women's cricket in India — the hands that once struggled to get a decent match fee were now holding the biggest prize the game had to offer.

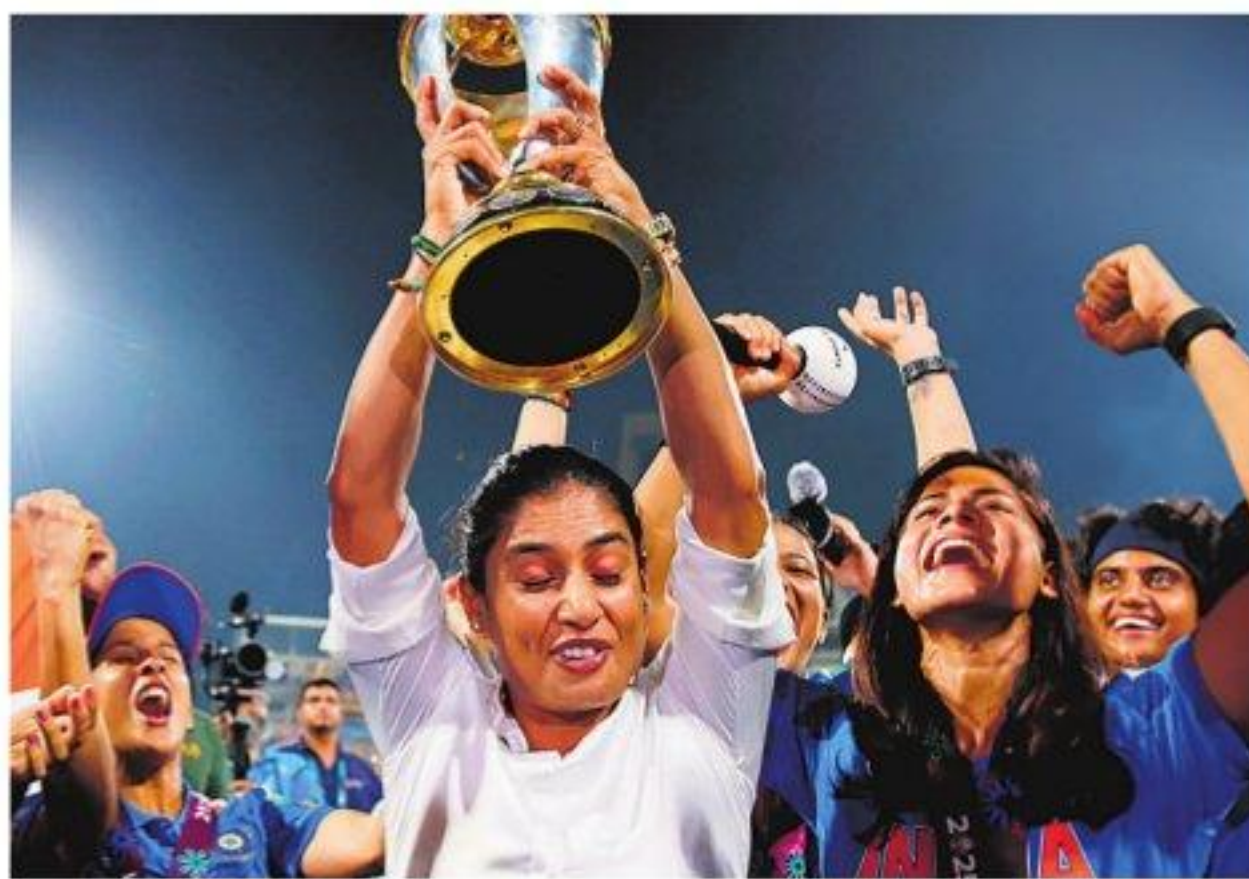
Lifting the women's World Cup is not just about a victory against all odds — it's a unique moment to accord to women's cricket in India the same facilities, opportunities and stage as the men get

That evening in Navi Mumbai was special. Lashed by unseasonal rains in a jam-packed DY Patil Stadium, the Indian women's cricket team was playing a World Cup final for the third time, while the spectators — most of them men — backed them with full-throated gusto. The happy ending had the women's team lifting its maiden title.

The euphoria of a victory after a long and tough journey culminated in tears of pure joy — be it the players, their families, those watching on TV screens all over the country



Shafali Verma has been a star in the making for quite some time, and has finally lived up to the billing. ANI



Surrounded by members of the winning team, former captain Mithali Raj, a star performer in her playing days and now a commentator, holds the World Cup, and can't hide her joy. ANI



Indian team captain Harmanpreet Kaur hugs former teammate and commentator Jhulan Goswami, for a long time the spearhead of the Indian bowling attack. ANI

and across the globe, the spectators and even the former women cricketers in the commentators' box. Indian women's cricket had finally come into its own, firing the imagination of a cricket-crazy country that had ignored them for far too long.

The victory was celebrated till 4 am before the players decided to go back to the team hotel. But the streams of people congratulating the girls was unending, at the stadium and at the hotel.

"This victory will trigger an explosion in women's cricket, not just in India but across the world. Keep in mind, India is already the largest cricketing nation with both a financial and emotional investment in the sport," Sharda Ugra, noted cricket journalist and author, told *The Tribune*.

This win will also create a parallel ecosystem in states where women's cricket has not been popular before, Ugra said, adding, "We can already see more and more girls wanting to play cricket. I just hope the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) is ready and will start putting more systems and structures in place, so they have more playing opportunities. Remember what Deepti Sharma said, that 'I hope we get to play more games'. It's very important now for this victory not to dissipate; women's cricket must have a regular cycle and calendar."

Harmanpreet, too, has stressed leveraging this win for a better organised future. "It will surely bring a revolution in Indian women's cricket, and it's now up to the young players to encash it. This team struggled a lot for two years, and finally ended up living this day, and I hope it shall bring a huge change," she said in the post-game interaction.

"A domestic and junior structure similar to what the men have is needed for young cricketers. I think it will be a big boost for the Women's Premier League, one of the top female events of the world in terms of its financial strength. There will be people wanting to put more money. This win brings a lot of advantages," Ugra says.



Harmanpreet Kaur has seen enough ups and downs to know the significance of a World Cup win. For her, the real gain will be if women's cricket gets equal respect. PTI

STILL A LOT TO DO

While the accolades are raining in, many cricketers wondered if a victory parade similar to what was arranged for the men's team when they won the World Cup last year could have gone a long way in ending the debate of "step-motherly" treatment

towards women cricketers. "The big change came when women's cricket came under the umbrella of the BCCI, that too after the ICC forced the BCCI to do so. Earlier, it was funded by fellow women cricketers, something that was really annoying," said Ugra.

"It will take time for female players to get perks and acknowledgment on par with men, but this can only be done if we make use of this moment," added Shikha Manchanda, a coach who trains young girls in Ludhiana.

REGION'S CONTRIBUTION

It's been a tough ride for the 36-year-old Indian skipper from Moga, Harmanpreet Kaur — there have been a lot of bright spots in her glittering career, but the ultimate prize always eluded her, until now.

From facing allegations of having a fake degree to writing in support of retaining a coach, Harmanpreet has endured it all. She's now the torchbearer of the game. She has led India in four T20 World Cups, and this was her first ODI World Cup as captain.

Harleen Deol, who once had to request the Punjab Chief Minister to help her practice in the Mohali stadium, was another important part of the middle order, as was all-rounder and Mohali girl Amanjot Kaur, who once tried her luck to play for Chandigarh.

Harleen stole the limelight off the ground too, when she asked Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who hosted the team in Delhi, a question that perhaps no one has till now — "Sir, what is your skincare routine, because there's such a glow on your face?" The easy laughter all around showed a confident bunch at ease with their achievements, happy in each other's company.

Coming from a humble background, Harmanpreet and Amanjot started playing cricket with boys just to teach them a lesson that they could not belittle their love for the sport. "I remember when I used to design bats for her, she always used to say, 'I will also play with branded bats one day', and I would just smile back," Amanjot's father Bhupinder Singh, a carpenter by profession, told *The Tribune*. The all-rounder, who batted, fielded

and bowled brilliantly in the World Cup, was once denied admission to the Sector 26 coaching centre in Chandigarh before a local coach, Nagesh Gupta, spotted her bat swing speed. It was at that moment in 2016 when she started playing serious cricket.

This World Cup also finally saw Rohtak's Shafali Verma live up to her billing of being a prodigious talent. Shafali, who was not even a part of the original squad, ensured her name got etched in record books.

The young opener joined the team just two days before the semifinal against Australia after opener Pratika Rawal got injured. She'd been sent by God for something good, she told the team.

In January, when she was dropped from the squad, she didn't share the news with her father, who had suffered a heart attack, for fear it would exacerbate his ill-health.

Himachal Pradesh, too, celebrated the exploits of Renuka Thakur, who led the bowling attack. Hailing from Parsa village in Rohru, Renuka's father, Kehar Singh Thakur, passed away when she was just three. Kehar had named his son after Vinod Kambli, but it's Renuka who's now the hill state's shining star.

Harmanpreet has experienced enough disappointment to know the transformative power of victory. She posed with the World Cup trophy sporting a T-shirt that said: "Cricket is a gentleman's everyone's game". Her team has made sure it is.



Amanjot Kaur deserves all the accolades she's getting, having played a key role in the win. PTI

MANDEEP SINGH

AT least 40-50 per cent of children endure bullying in the institutional care of schools and private coaching centres across India, according to multiple UNICEF studies. Such perturbing statistics often get lost in the corridors of schools — dismissed as isolated incidents or buried under hackneyed whispers of "grow some thick skin, it's part of growing up". Yet, from time to time, the brutality resurfaces in ways that could put even William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* to shame.

Recently, an eight-year-old Dalit boy in Shimla was reportedly assaulted by three teachers who even put a scorpion in his pants. Earlier, in January, a 15-year-old student in Kochi took his own life after allegedly being forced by classmates to lick a toilet seat. Such cases may momentarily jolt the authorities out of slumber, but warrant deeper examination and intervention at both the psychological and policy levels.

Several developmental psychologists believe that by the age of six, a child begins to crystallise concrete attitudes towards other social groups and individuals, often underlined by caste, gender, religion and class. Consequently, children driven by inherent instincts for in-group favouritism may repeatedly target and harm those outside their social group to assert dominance.

Dr Damanjit Kaur Sandhu, head of the Department of Psychology at Punjabi University, Patiala, explains, "Children in North India usually bully to achieve social status. They attempt to act beyond their age through their dressing patterns, gadgets, or bikes. The underlying principle is moral disengagement, or a lack of empathy in the bully." She also cautions, "If juvenile delinquency remains unchecked in a student, it can most certainly metastasise into adult crime. A comprehensive policy to curb bullying needs to be clearly spelled out by the government."

The principal of a private school situated on the outskirts of Patiala notes that many parents from low-income families increasingly choose private schools for their children, lured by the promise of upward class mobility. Parents also often feel more comfortable "outsourcing their responsibility for the mental well-being of their child to a private entity". This may intuitively make sense, as a senior teacher at a Punjab government school, who wishes not to be named, states, "There are simply no mental health counsellors



Bullying appears to be insidiously and rapidly festering in Indian classrooms, and inaction is making it worse. ISTOCK

Countering bullying

It's ignored in most schools, there is little effort to counsel students, and what's sorely missing is the notion of collective accountability

or confidential complaint mechanisms to report cases of bullying in government schools."

A common grievance of several educators from both private and government institutions whom *The Tribune* spoke to is the increased administrative workload under the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. This, they point out, leaves little room for creatively engaging with children or constructively addressing cases of harassment.

In the same vein, authors Kusha Anand and Marie C Lall, in their book *Bridging Neoliberalism & Hindu Nationalism*, argue that the teachers' dwindling autonomy and rising accountability have led to a shallow culture of performativity under the NEP 2020.

Consequently, when viewed through the lens of bullying, the fault lines between private and government schools also begin to blur, as also highlighted in Nazia Erum's *'Mothering a Muslim'*.

Erum found that over 100 of the 118 Muslim children she interviewed, aged between five and 20, had been bullied at some point in their schools or had been called a Pakistani or a terrorist. Surprisingly, these children were enrolled in 22 leading schools across South Delhi, Gurugram and Noida. Hence, several social psychologists note that one's critical gaze cannot be confined merely to the lessons imparted in classrooms. It is the 'hidden curriculum' — a plethora of subtle rituals rooted in the ethnocentric re-imag-

ination of the nation, be it assembly prayers, textbooks, or the selective celebration of certain festivals — that can contribute to inter-peer bullying and the systemic marginalisation of children from particular communities, even in the most elite schools.

Erum also highlights another menace rising alarmingly across schools — the phenomenon of cyberbullying, fuelled by the proliferation of smartphones among children and the growing focus on digital education since Covid. On cyberbullying, Prof Sandhu remarks, "It's a new way to be anonymous, displace responsibility and often display animosity towards the opposite sex. I have seen cases of young teens in Ludhiana and Jalandhar who indulge in creating fake pictures through AI to blackmail and bully their female classmates. School authorities, parents and even the police try to brush these incidents under the carpet to avoid escalation or to preserve the future of their children."

In all, bullying appears to be insidiously and rapidly festering in Indian classrooms. From classrooms to chatrooms, the message is clear — bullying, in all its evolving forms, demands urgent collective accountability.

In terms of interventions, Prof Sarla Dwivedi, a Chhattisgarh-based psychologist, states, "Mediation between children through role-plays, skits, or allowing them to express their emotions in a safe space has proven to be beneficial in several countries in countering bullying." Prof Sandhu highlights, "We need a multi-pronged approach under which all stakeholders — including parents, police, lawyers and psychologists — help children realise the long-term ramifications of their actions on themselves and others."

The most concerted efforts, experts stress, must be made at the policy level by the government to ensure a safe and dignified education for every child.

The Supreme Court's constitution of a National Task Force in March this year, in the context of student suicides across higher education institutions, was a welcome step. It also issued 15 interim guidelines in July, which will remain binding until proper legislation is enacted to protect the mental well-being of children.

The apex court also affirmed that a student's mental health falls under Article 21, the right to life. Therefore, it is an inherent duty of the government to ensure that whenever a child walks into a classroom carrying a school bag, there is also an invisible protective shield of fundamental rights and emotional well-being that must be preserved at all costs.

Vigilance lost

The theft of royal jewels from the Louvre is more than an audacious crime. It is a warning about what happens when prestige eclipses prudence. The world's most visited museum, entrusted with guarding humanity's treasures, now finds itself accused of neglecting the very duty that defines it.

For years, the Louvre has dazzled the world with grand exhibitions, ambitious acquisitions, and visionary projects promising a "new Renaissance." Yet beneath the spectacle lay an unglamorous truth: its systems of protection and maintenance had been allowed to decay.

While millions were spent acquiring new works and redesigning spaces, only a fraction went toward security and upkeep. The result was a perfect storm ~ priceless jewels exposed, safety protocols outdated, and complacency mistaken for confidence.

The heist, executed in broad daylight, has become a symbol of misplaced priorities. It was not the work of a sophisticated global syndicate but of petty criminals exploiting institutional neglect. That makes the failure even more damning. The Louvre did not fall victim to superior cunning; it fell victim to its own inattention.

The episode also challenges France's cultural establishment to rethink how heritage institutions are funded and managed. When politics and prestige drive priorities, essential but invisible systems ~ security, maintenance, staff training ~ suffer. The Louvre's lapse, therefore, is not an isolated event but a reflection of broader systemic disregard for the mundane work that preserves greatness.

This theft exposes a deeper malaise within cultural institutions: the belief that visibility equals vitality. In the race to modernise and impress, the Louvre forgot that its greatest achievement was never its expansion, it was its stewardship. A museum that cannot secure what it already holds undermines the very legitimacy of its ambition.

There is also an ethical dimension to this neglect. The jewels that disappeared were not mere ornaments; they were fragments of Europe's collective memory, objects that connect modern France to its imperial past. Losing them so carelessly is not just a material failure but a moral one. It suggests a shift in priorities, from guardianship to showmanship.

The Louvre's much-publicised New Renaissance project, already burdened by rising costs and questionable feasibility, now stands as a cautionary symbol of overreach. No cultural vision, however bold, can justify underinvesting in the fundamentals. Without trust in its security and preservation, even the Louvre's grandeur rings hollow.

The museum's leadership has promised reform and insists it has long-term plans to strengthen protection. That is necessary but not sufficient. What is truly required is a cultural reset, one that places preservation ahead of publicity, vigilance ahead of vanity.

The jewels may one day be recovered. But the damage to the Louvre's reputation will take far longer to restore. The world's greatest museum now faces a simple truth: before it can lead a new renaissance, it must first relearn how to guard its own past.

Quantum Meets AI

For some years now, artificial intelligence has commanded the spotlight, reshaping industries, dazzling investors, and alarming policymakers in equal measure. But behind the noise of algorithms and chatbots, another technology is slowly assembling its pieces in near silence. Quantum computing, still in its infancy, could eventually change the nature of computation itself, and in doing so, redefine the boundaries of AI and every field it touches.

Quantum technology is often described in paradoxes because it operates in a world of paradoxes. Its building blocks, qubits, do not behave like the tidy bits of classical computing. They can exist in multiple states at once, enabling an exponential explosion in processing power.

The result is a form of computation so advanced that problems requiring billions of years to solve today could, in theory, be cracked in seconds. Yet that potential remains trapped behind the glass walls of laboratories, where machines the size of rooms must be chilled to temperatures colder than outer space to stay stable.

Still, even in this embryonic stage, the implications are profound. Quantum could revolutionise drug discovery by modelling molecular interactions beyond the reach of existing computers, paving the way for medicines tailored to individual bodies. It could optimise logistics, chemical processes, or energy grids with unprecedented precision. In the realm of national security, it might render current encryption systems obsolete ~ a prospect already driving nations to hoard encrypted data for a future when quantum can break it open.

In contrast, AI's appeal lies in immediacy. Its tools are accessible, its benefits tangible, and its risks already visible. Quantum, on the other hand, represents delayed disruption, a future that still feels speculative but is quietly approaching. The question is not whether it will arrive, but whether we will be ready when it does.

Quantum computing may still be untested at scale, but its ripple effects could reshape economies, governance, and global digital sovereignty.

Both technologies, however, share a cautionary tale: the risk of hype overwhelming understanding. Just as inflated expectations once led to disillusionment with early AI, quantum too could suffer a credibility crisis if promises outpace progress. Yet, this moment of uncertainty may also be its strength, allowing scientists and policymakers to build safeguards before commercialisation begins.

If AI challenged our notions of creativity and control, quantum could challenge our very sense of certainty. Its logic defies intuition, its outcomes are probabilistic, and its potential to disrupt encryption and privacy will test how societies manage power in the digital age.

Ultimately, quantum and AI are not rivals but partners in evolution. AI gave machines the ability to "think"; quantum may one day give them the power to "understand" complexity itself. When these forces converge, they could redefine computation, not as a faster process, but as a deeper one, to herald the dawn of a truly intelligent era.

Differences and Diplomacy

Diplomacy necessitates focusing on commonalities, rather than on differences, in the hope that the larger outcomes lead to betterment, even if they are still far from perfect. For India to only focus on Taliban's obvious wrongs would only perpetuate the divide and worsen portents, whereas engagement and interaction could lead to possibilities of positive changes for India (and Afghanistan), in every realm

Much hullabaloo was made of Afghanistan's acting Foreign Minister, Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi's press conference at the Afghan Embassy, where women journalists were disallowed. While India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) clarified that it had no role in organizing the press interaction, there was widespread criticism of Delhi's supposed acquiescence of gender discrimination. Civil society, journalists, and opposition leaders, called out the Taliban government's discriminatory act.

Firstly, the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations (1961) grants privileges and immunities that extend to invitations and accesses to embassies in any host country. So technically, the Afghanistan Embassy in Delhi was well within its right to filter the audience that it sought to engage with its Foreign Minister, however picky it was in making those choices. If gender was the discriminatory factor here, one can only imagine the sort of filters that an Embassy of say Israel, China, or North Korea, would deploy whilst planning engagement with their respective authority figures in Delhi. It is highly unlikely that a Tibetan or even a journalist from the Indian State of Arunachal Pradesh would get invited to the Chinese Embassy in Delhi.

Importantly, Muttaqi did make amends quickly and included women journalists in his second press conference. He unconvincedly attributed the earlier exclusion to "short notice." The implausible "short notice" notwithstanding, the fact that he denied the charges of gender discrimination and made the necessary inclusions subsequently must be lauded, especially coming from a representative of a regressive, puritanical, and hyper-religious regime like the Taliban. If anything, Muttaqi chose to acquiesce to the "normalcy" of the host nation as opposed to insisting on the known sensibilities of his



own government. The diplomatic adjustment and compromise ultimately came from Muttaqi's side.

This subsequent correction does not condone the sweeping restrictions on women re-imposed by the Taliban in their second tenure. From banning education for a girl child beyond the sixth grade, banning employment in government or relief jobs, legal or political diminishment, or even restricting access to healthcare and social mobility ~ the psychological, physical, and social discrimination against women in Afghanistan is abysmal. It is at complete variance to the societal and constitutional status of women in India.

But then India has had evolutionary changes and reforms over time, whereas the complex and perennially wounded history of Afghanistan has not been afforded the same progressive transformation. If the subcontinent's fight against the British colonists was rooted in a secular movement (till a very late stage) and subsequent constitutionality, the local Afghan fight against the foreign powers, be it against the the British, Soviets, or the Americans, was always rooted in feudal/tribal pride or religiosity (Jihad). There are civilisational (violent land of the "Great Game"), cultural-tribal, and even religious reasons for the Afghan narrative to remain unevolved, even today.

However, diplomacy necessitates focusing on commonalities, rather than on differences, in the hope that the larger outcomes lead to betterment, even if they are still far from perfect. For India to only focus on Taliban's obvious wrongs would only perpetuate the divide and worsen portents, whereas engagement and interaction could lead to possibilities of positive changes for India

(and Afghanistan), in every realm.

Even purely from realpolitik, a friendly Afghanistan denies Pakistan its long cherished "Strategic Depth" in Afghanistan. Besides obvious economic and strategic opportunities (e.g., gateway to Central Asia via the Chabahar port in Iran) ~ the Indian footprint in

Afghanistan cuts into the possible influence of China and positions Delhi as the global pointsman for Afghanistan to the rest of the world.

The cultural and societal affinity towards India and Indians in Afghanistan, as opposed to perceptions of Pakistanis, Chinese, Iranians, Russians or even the Americans, is unmatched. Delhi must cash in on that positivity for itself and use that lever for "normalising" and positivizing Taliban's outlook, especially for its vulnerable sections. But by not engaging, Delhi also denies the Afghan populace under Taliban that possible opportunity to "open up" and

reform. India does (and must) continue engaging with nations it has disagreements with, be they societal or governmental. India actively engages with many Arab Sheikhdoms with "normalcies" that are at stark variance with Indian society or even having complicated sovereign positions on sensitive issues like J&K. India does invest heavily with Israel even though Delhi's position on Palestine is at variance with that of the current dispensation in Tel Aviv. Similarly, Delhi has strong relations with an undemocratic and authoritarian regime in Moscow; just as we may or may



BHOPINDER SINGH

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When treaty shields collide with an asset recovery crusade

The S Alam Group owner, Mohammad Saiful Alam, has recently taken Bangladesh to the arbitration arm of the World Bank under the 2004 Bangladesh-Singapore bilateral investment treaty (BIT). The arbitration request lodged by his lawyers alleges that Bangladesh's asset recovery drive has cost his family business "hundreds of millions" of dollars following what he calls a "targeted campaign" of asset freezes, confiscations, and investigations by the interim government.

This development cannot be taken lightly. It directly tests how an anti-corruption drive meets the hard law of investor protection, and the outcome may send powerful signals to investors. The 2004 Bangladesh-Singapore treaty defines an investor as a citizen of a contracting state and offers guarantees including fair and equitable treatment, full protection and security, free transfer of capital, and compensation for expropriation. It also allows an investor to start a case at the World Bank's International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes (ICSID) after a six-month cooling-off period.

Letters To The Editor | ✉ editor@thestatesman.com

EC must respond

Sir, This refers to the front page report, "Rahul alleges massive vote fraud in Haryana, ECI rejects charge" (6 November). A day before the first phase of the Bihar Assembly elections, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi turned the spotlight on the 2024 Haryana polls, in which his party had suffered a shock defeat at the hands of the ruling BJP.

Citing electoral roll data to claim that as many as 25 lakh entries were fake, the Leader of the Opposition in Lok Sabha accused the Election Commission of India (ECI) of colluding with the BJP to ensure its victory. This is Rahul's biggest allegation of 'vote chori' so far - arguably his so-called H-bomb - and also his strongest attack on the ECI.

Earlier this year, he claimed that such malpractices had taken place in Mahadevapura and Aland Assembly constituency in Karnataka. Gandhi's claim about one out of every eight voters in Haryana being fake does strain credulity, but it's no doubt a

serious charge that demands a thorough probe. He has tried to drive his point home by sharing the voter list of Haryana's Rai constituency, where the photo of a Brazilian model was used 22 times in 10 booths, with names such as Seema, Sweety and Saraswati.

The authorities should counter Rahul's allegations with concrete evidence instead of harping on the 'why now' question. At stake is the sanctity of the poll process as well as the ECI's credibility. It's vital to safeguard public trust in the entire exercise, especially amid the nationwide SIR.

Yours, etc., S S Paul, Nadia, 6 November.

Governance

Sir, This refers to the editorial "Politics of Hunger" published today, which aptly exposes the moral vacuum behind the ongoing political deadlock over food assistance in the United States. It is disturbing that in one of the world's richest nations, millions must

is or has been a national of the host state (Bangladesh in this case). ICSID lacks jurisdiction. The tribunal will test nationality with careful attention to timing, continuity, and evidence.

The next fight sits inside the investment treaty itself. The BIT protects investments in Bangladesh made by investors of Singapore. If most group assets were put in place when controllers were Bangladeshi nationals, Bangladesh can argue that those assets were not made by investors of Singapore and fall outside protection.

So, expect a trench war over when assets were created, how they were funded, and who controlled them. Tribunals look past formalities to real ownership and timing. Bangladesh may also argue abuse of process. In the past, claims have been dismissed where an investor restructured their assets to gain treaty protection once a dispute was anticipated. The rejection of the Philip Morris Asia v. Australia claim - after the company restructured on paper to invoke a treaty while the plain packaging dispute was already underway - is a classic example. So, motive and timing are crucial.



live in fear of losing access to basic nourishment because of partisan conflict.

Food security should never be treated as a negotiable budget item ~ it is a fundamental right and a test of governance. When political leaders prioritize rhetoric over responsibility, the credibility of democracy itself begins to erode. Lawmakers must find common ground and safeguard essential programmes like SNAP, not as charity but as a moral obligation to their citizens. A nation's true strength lies in compassion, not calculation.

Yours, etc., Avinashiappan Myilsami, Coimbatore, 5 November.

not have similarly warm relations in Bangladesh or Nepal, even with the democratic free will of its people (despite cultural, civilisational or religious commonalities). There is simply no alternative to engagement, even if one were to disagree on certain aspects of the other side.

India needs to engage confidently with the conviction that it has had women Presidents, Prime Minister, Foreign Minister, Foreign Secretaries, eminent Journalists and Editors (e.g., of this very publication), all on account of their merit. India can teach by inspiring examples and not necessarily by preaching or denialism. If anything, in recent times it has conveniently forsaken engagement selectively with Pakistan (ironically not with China, its foremost enemy) as publicly decrying Pakistan has electoral gratification in domestic politics. However, when a financial "deal" is attractive (read, BCCI stakes), it readily plays cricket matches with Pakistan with public postures of no handshakes ~ this is convenient, partisan and amnesic nationalism, which is inconsistently flexed depending on situations.

If we can rightly shape relations with the Taliban (whilst disagreeing with many of their moorings), we can similarly engage with other neighbours if we can conduct diplomacy shorn of the electoral lens. If engagement with Xi Jinping (despite the bloody Summer of 2020) and Taliban is kosher and conditional, it can also be with yet another troublesome neighbour across the Line-of-Control. Non-engagement is sheer partisanship as Atal Behari Vajpayee, the doyen of the current persuasion, famously said, "You can change friends but not neighbours", while insisting on engagement with Pakistan. Differences and electoral calculus must not mix with diplomacy.

On the merits, the S Alam family may argue that sweeping freezes and investigations, paired with public accusations and travel limits, amount to indirect expropriation and unfair and inequitable treatment. Bangladesh may reply that a clean-up drive to recover looted assets is a public-purpose measure, pursued under law with judicial oversight, and that no expropriation exists where ownership remains and due process is available. The treaty language on expropriation in the 2004 text is outdated, and does not grant automatic cover for anti-corruption work or other public-interest measures. Process and proportionality will decide this round.

Past experience offers sharp lessons. In Saipem v. Bangladesh, the ICSID found it had jurisdiction and later ruled that Bangladesh had breached the BIT after its courts invalidated an ICC award ~ a warning about judicial interference. In the Niko saga over gas blowouts, multiple rulings followed, and a later committee upheld an award against two state entities over gas deliveries. ICSID tribunals have often granted massive awards once a breach is found.

Commendable

Sir, It's commendable that Kerala has been crowned as the first to achieve the distinction of extreme poverty free state in India. Though there may be reservations about such claims, one thing is clear: the state is making remarkable strides in the human development indices and faring better than others.

To come out of poverty completely is utopian. It's a continuous process, but not a fixed destination. But working towards that ideal, with comprehensive plans, would give better results.

The Central Government and other states should study Kerala's inspirational story and compete with it in achieving a better place on the ladder of human development. But the poll promises made by major parties in the ongoing Bihar assembly elections have been discouraging.

Yours, etc., Dr DVG Sankara Rao, ex MP, Vizianagaram, 5 November.



PMAY emerges as India’s template for the world

SK NAG

Affordable housing is a solution for those who cannot afford to have a roof over their head unless it is subsidised or economised to suit their needs. This price-sensitive segment is always priced out due to higher investment needs that go beyond their loan eligibility. The aspiration of having their own house remains an unmet dream. Global statistics indicate the number of homeless is increasing not only in underdeveloped and developing nations, but also in developed nations (New York and Los Angeles are two of the cities counted among the top to have large numbers of homeless people). Around 300 million people are homeless globally (according to the United Nations), which will reach 330 million by the end of 2025. Besides this, around 2.8 billion people lack access to adequate housing. More shockingly, around 15 million people worldwide are evicted each year, according to statistics. This number is further increased due to climate adversity and disasters. The world is therefore facing an unprecedented crisis of housing shortage. Housing, more than shelter, is the third skin of human beings, bringing safety, stability, and dignity to the occupier and, ultimately, to the nation through its sustainable foundation in a growing ecosystem. Though the housing problem is universal, its manifestations differ by context and country. This urgency of affordable housing was critically underlined at the UN-Habitat Assembly in Nairobi on 29-30 May 2025, which adopted the strategic plan for 2026-29, prioritising global needs and calling for coordinated action to treat 'access to housing' as a fundamental human right and a cornerstone of sustainable development. The plan seeks to ensure every person has a shelter with dignity and envisages scaling up affordable housing initiatives through innovative

financing, public-private partnerships, and policy reform, and by expanding the social protection system to prevent homelessness, etc. In India, 18 lakh people are homeless, of whom 52 per cent are in urban areas, and around 7.3 crore lack access to adequate decent housing (IGH, 2018; Habitat, 2019). The situation is aggravated by population growth, poverty, income inequality, and unemployment-driven city-centric population concentration. The population growth in urban areas has outpaced the growth of urban housing inventories, leading to the discouraging situation of forcing them to live in marginalised spaces, informal settlements on the street side. This rural-urban migration is a significant problem, particularly in developing countries, where opportunities and livelihoods are believed to be available in urban areas. Homelessness is not a problem that will be eradicated overnight; it requires coordinated action and commitment by all stakeholders. Communities can reverse these trends through positive development on the ground, addressing not only urban housing but also inclusive economic development. Accordingly, India, the most populous country in the world, viewed this as a hurdle to growth that required immediate attention. The Prime Minister announced the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY) in two phases: PMAY-Urban on 25 June 2015 and PMAY-Gramin on 1 April 2016, with a vision to provide housing for all by 2022, which has now been extended till December 2025. The target beneficiaries shall be the Economically Weaker Sections (EWS), Low Income Groups (LIG) and Middle-Income Groups (MIG) in urban areas. It has a historical connection to the Indira Awas Yojana, launched a few decades ago.

PMAY (Urban) has four components: In-situ Slum Redevelopment (ISSR), Credit Linked Subsidy Scheme (CLSS), Affordable Housing Partnership (AHP)

and Beneficiary Led Construction (BLC). The total planned outlay for PMAY (U) under PMAY 1.0 is Rs 8.39 lakh crores. A total of 1.12 crore houses have been sanctioned, and around 96 lakh have been delivered to beneficiaries. Under PMAY 2.0, an additional 10 lakh houses have been sanctioned. To date, out of the Rs 2.05 lakh crore committed, Rs 1.74 lakh crore in central assistance has been released. The commitment vs. plan shows the achievement is around 25 per cent, but the commitment to the disbursement figure indicates a quick, progressive delivery of benefits. The state-wise statistics suggest that the most successful implementation of the PMAY benefit has been achieved by Uttar Pradesh in both the urban and rural schemes, at 98 and 95 per cent respectively. But ironically, Maharashtra (39 per cent) and Andhra Pradesh (48 per cent) are lagging. The impact of PMAY is not limited to the national focus; it has crossed the geographical boundaries of our country. It has attracted international policymakers because of its innovative structure, which enhances financial efficiency to augment the country's growth. A house that provides a roof over our heads brings dignity to life by acting as a third skin for our bodies.

Therefore, looking at the financial supply chain of this scheme with its structure of Subsidised Home loans under the credit-linked subsidy scheme (CLSS), allowing beneficiaries to avail interest subsidy on their home loan, reducing EMIs (by Rs 2000 to Rs 2500), matching the eligibility of EWS, LIG & MIG (Urban) consumers.

In Beneficiary-Led Construction (BLC), the landowner received a subsidy for their own home construction, making the dream a reality. In addition, under the Affordable Housing in Partnership (AHP) programme, private developers received government incentives to provide affordable housing at subsidised rates, mainly in urban areas. Like PMAY Urban,



PMAY Gramin also focused on Rural areas to build 3 crore houses through the Direct Benefit Transfer Process. To achieve women's empowerment, joint ownership was given greater importance. What attracted countries around the world to the scheme is not only that it addressed the home solution, but also created economic growth through employment generation in construction, steel, cement and associated industries. The private housing segment is under pressure from heavy price corrections (7 to 10 per cent) due to a massive number of inventories being made available by Government housing agencies such as CIDCO, MHADA, HUDCO, etc. Cities like Nagpur, Nashik, Surat, Indore, Raipur, Lucknow, Pune, Ahmedabad and Hyderabad are benefiting from AHP and government housing schemes. Private developers' monopoly over an arbitrary pricing mechanism is now indirectly regulated through this PMAY project, which has acted as a double-edged sword. This will bring rationality to the cost structure in the housing market.

The banking sector has seen strong business traction due to ample inventory and government-backed housing schemes, driving market demand amid the aspiration to own a home. Therefore, the domestic economy has received a reboot through one key initiative that addresses the bottom of the pyramid and nurtures their latent desire to succeed.

In the international forum, the PMAY urban scheme is referred to as "one of the largest affordable housing programmes globally," indicating

that global policymakers are watching us. The challenge perceived by the international community is the supply chain mechanism for delivering without any leakage. The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace has drawn lessons on subsidy design, demand-side support, home-ownership bias, multiple verticals in one scheme, Digital monitoring through geo-tagging, and addressing the large-scale ambition of the individual and country at large.

Global bodies like UN-Habitat and the World Bank cite this scheme as an example of a successful public distribution system. Indonesia's slum upgrading and state-led models are often discussed alongside PMAY at UN-Habitat. Soon, African countries will adopt their own model based on the PMAY philosophy. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) researchers have cited PMAY as a benchmark for government-led reform in welfare delivery, through the exemplary utilisation of digital infrastructure and financial inclusion, and by fixing leakages not through threats but through system design, making the system a global template. Homelessness is not inevitable; with coordinated action and commitment, the international community can reverse these trends. As the world meets at the Second World Summit for Social Development in Doha this month, the message is clear: accelerating social progress requires that every person has access to a safe, secure, and dignified place to call home.

(The writer is a Mumbai-based freelance writer, MSME strategist and industry mentor.)

Finance must serve economy, not exploit it

ANDREW SHENG

President Xi Jinping's speech at the Fourth Plenum in Beijing last month outlined the guidelines for the upcoming 15th Five-Year Plan (2026-2030). There was clear determination to focus on technological self-reliance, building a "high quality productive forces" economic model based on innovation and strong industrial base that would be resilient against external threats and headwinds.

At the Beijing Finance Street Forum at the end of October, Vice Premier He Lifeng stressed the need for China's financial system to advance risk prevention, strengthen regulation, promote high-quality development and push for high-standard opening up. Since the 15th Five-Year Plan period (2026-2030) will be a key period for basically achieving socialist modernization by 2035, a high-quality productive real economy model will require high-quality financial development, demanding an equally strong financial sector. Foreign visitors to the Forum welcomed the announcement that China would continue to open up her financial sector to foreign participation.

During the Forum, all top financial leaders, including People's Bank Governor Pan Gongsheng, National Financial Regulatory Administration Minister Li Yunze and China Securities Regulatory Commission Chairman Wu Qing, outlined measures to improve

macro-prudential regulation, make the financial system more inclusive and supportive of high-quality growth, whilst emphasizing appropriate risk management and financial stability.

The Plenum Communiqué set the guiding principles for the 15th Five-Year Plan very clearly. The Party is firmly in charge of leading and implementation; putting the people first; pursuing high-quality development; comprehensively deepening reform; promoting interplay between an efficient market and a well-functioning government; and ensuring both development and security.

That would require the Plan to deliver significant achievements in "high-quality development; substantial improvements in scientific and technological self-reliance and strength; fresh breakthroughs in further deepening reform comprehensively; notable cultural and ethical progress across society; further improvements in quality of life; major new strides in advancing the Beautiful China Initiative; and further advances in strengthening the national security shield".

To achieve all these, the Plan, which will only be fully published next March, had explanatory notes published last week that GDP growth to 2035 would be around 4.17 per cent per annum, slower than the 5.2-5.4 per cent growth rate achieved during the 14th Plan Period (2021-2025). If this target is achieved, per capita GDP by 2030 would be around \$20,000,

roughly the mid-level of what the World Bank considers to be advanced countries' performance. Assuming that the population of China by 2030 would be 1.386 billion, the GDP by then would be \$27.7 trillion.

The IMF's estimate on China's GDP by 2030 are \$25.8 trillion, with Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) GDP at \$47.38 trillion. By comparison, the IMF estimate for the United States (PPP) GDP by 2030 would be \$33.96 trillion, with no estimate for nominal GDP. If US nominal GDP is close to PPP levels, China by 2030 would be roughly between 76-82 per cent of US nominal GDP, but larger than the US in PPP terms by 39.5 per cent. In short, by 2030, China would be an economic powerhouse, requiring a substantially deeper and more resilient financial sector to support continued stable growth. Finance supporting innovative technology is exactly the area where the United States is still leading. The United States took 75 years to overtake the United Kingdom in displacing the pound sterling in 1945, as by 1870, the United States was on par with the British Empire in terms of nominal GDP. During this time, the United States built up Wall Street, created the Federal Reserve, nation-wide banking, strong commodity and stock markets. She also built very strong insurance, pension and financial derivative markets.

For China to support high quality growth, including taking high risks

in new technological revolution and industrial transformation, would require her to deepen her long-term pension, insurance and private equity funds that can produce patient capital to absorb high risk innovation projects and infrastructure investments.

Foundationally, a strong financial system is built on strong, stable money. The United States Dollar has an entrenched dominant position because it is the leading fiat money reserve currency, accounting for 74 per cent of international trade payments in Asia, 58 per cent of central bank reserves, and 90 per cent of global foreign exchange transactions. When a large part of the foreign exchange reserves backing a country's own money is in US dollars, what happens when the US decides to impose sanctions and freeze such USD assets, as had happened to Russia after 2022? Holding foreign fiat currency as majority backing for domestic fiat currency has a sanction risk that is today not zero. The weaponization of the US dollar, as lamented by former IMF Chief Economist Ken Rogoff (Our Dollar, Your Problem) and former US Treasury Undersecretary Lael Brainard (Exorbitant Privilege), is causing foreign holders of dollars, friends and foes alike, to re-think the use of the dollar as the anchor of monetary stability.

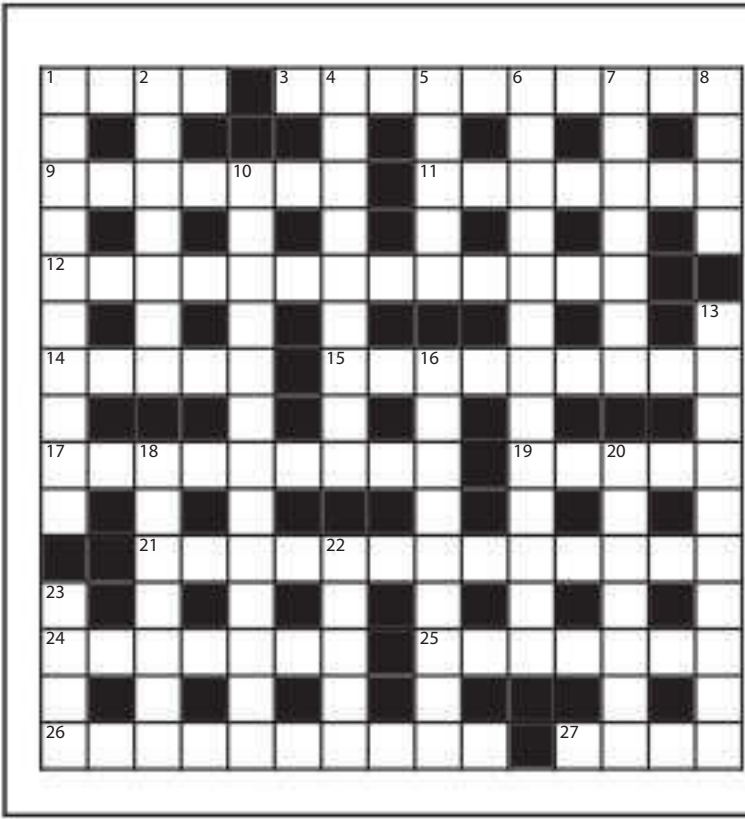
The dollar will remain as the dominant fiat currency in usage, but people are now thinking of how to

avoid the weaponization risk.

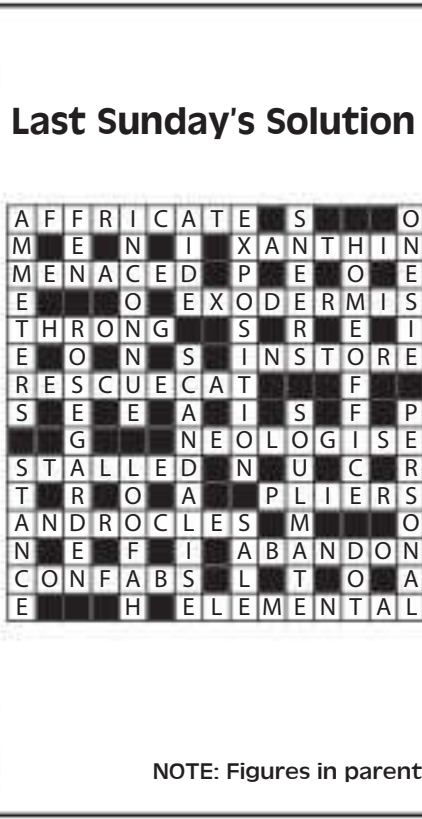
This is most evident in the rising price of gold, as central banks have been adding 1,000 tonnes of gold to their reserves every year for the last three years. China is today the largest producer of gold in the world, and the Shanghai Gold Exchange has the largest turnover in gold transactions. China has today roughly 7 per cent of gold in her foreign exchange reserves, roughly the same as Japan, with the global average at 20 per cent. The advanced economies of Europe and the US have about 70-80 per cent of their foreign exchange reserves in gold, mainly because their currencies are reserve currencies for the rest of the world. A return to the gold standard is not eminent, but a hybrid system is now on many drawing boards. Finance is meant to serve the real, people-based economy, not to exploit it. Thus, the path towards deeper, inclusive and green finance that is risk-resilient and supportive of innovation and technology, must be the foundation of the new Chinese development model. That is a work in progress at a scale in population and quality never before tried in history. That is the underlying message behind building a socialist economy with Chinese characteristics.

(The writer is Distinguished Fellow of Asia Global Institute, University of Hong Kong, and Chairman of the George Town Institute of Open and Advanced Studies, Wawasan Open University, Penang. The views expressed here are the writer's own.) Special to ANN.

Crossword | No. 293287



Last Sunday's Solution



ACROSS

1 Send Pole to announce appointment (4)

3 Republican fellow in vote shows consideration (10)

9 Female pens revolutionary opening lines (7)

11 Violent genre leads to attention deficit disorder (7)

12 One copper perhaps gathers nobodys at home (2,4,7)

14 Chaps in A & E returned for medical treatment (5)

15 Rushed to print by two editors (9)

17 Soviet official giving order to young woman in taxi? (9)

19 Christmas stocking originally bought for chemist (5)

21 Eating duck, unfortunately no diet health dish (4-2-3-4)

24 Turned up, extremely disappointed by trendy golf course (7)

25 Country dancing is not easy? Not half! (7)

26 Time of year bound to unite swallows beginning to migrate (10)

27 Dictator's top dog (4)

DOWN

1 Introduce steps to change pandemic (10)

2 Massage egos or start to criticise mean fellow? (7)

4 Just tucked into additional small snack (9)

5 Some salad leaves a requirement for Spooner? (5)

6 Send report on onset of conflict possibly, being this? (13)

7 Break in? I d get fired (7)

8 Want to work on radio? (4)

10 Quibbling before departure about college (13)

13 Cut price of drug for grown-ups? (10)

16 Current plan to conceal bungled arrest (9)

18 Dispatcher of bull from Rome mostly carrying information around (7)

20 Fairy cake (7)

22 Elected to leave on time for bar (5)

23 Ring up about special work (4)

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

NOW AND AGAIN

GOING BACK IN TIME

SHOVANLAL CHAKRABORTY

In the early 1980s era of terrestrial television, we had to power on our Weston TV set manually. It buzzed loudly – crude, but music to our ears as teens. The brand's tagline was "Providing true value."

The Doordarshan montage, which seemed to take an eternity, signalled that programmes were about to begin. News bulletins, introduced with a heavy signature tune designed to command attention, were read by persons who were celebrities in their own right: Geetanjali Aiyar, Tejeshwar Singh, Salma Sultan, Sarala Maheshwari, and Minu Talwar, among others. We would play guessing games about who would appear on screens that evening.

Ad jingles were melodic and catchy with simple themes – the sort you wouldn't want to skip, even if you could. There was Sunil Gavaskar endorsing Dinesh Suitsings, Kapil Dev saying 'Palmolive da jawaab nahi' at the height of his popularity, and Salman Khan singing in a breezy Campa Cola ad, apart from "Chal meri Luna" and Lalitaji for Surf. Many of these commercials, now circulating on social media, bring a rush of nostalgia to Gen-Xers.

Our favourite programmes were Sherlock Holmes, Malgudi Days, Karamchand, Humlog, Chitrahaar and the weekly films. We awaited them keenly. Waiting, indeed, was the defining feature of our viewing.

That patience carried us into the late 1980s and even the 1990s. A youthful Pranjoy Roy, with his familiar "Good evening and welcome", introduced us to "The World This Week" on Doordarshan - a window to international news. In the 1990s, S P Singh would close the Aaj Tak bulletin with "intezaar kijiye kal tak" (wait until tomorrow), and we did just that.

From frugal television menus we have moved on to convergence – now we can binge endlessly, 24X7. Content is king. There is, to be sure, a wealth of storytelling available thanks to OTT platforms. Everything is immediate. Advertisements intrude from every direction, but that, we are told, is engagement.

No longer do we wait for programmes; an OTT giant tells us our watchlist is waiting. Everything is marketed as "binge-worthy." Watch this, watch that, watch it all - for there is no tomorrow.

Everything is faster and noisier now.

We slip into our own little private universes in search of more novel, more visceral experiences. While new content can indeed educate and enlighten, it is often explicit and unfiltered, overstimulating and addictive. Where to draw the line is anyone's guess.

Interestingly, I recently read of an American company that has developed a tin-can phone. Similar to a landline, it is designed for parents keen to delay handing their children a mobile. It allows social autonomy, but with parental controls – only approved contacts can call. That, surely, is going back in time!

News Items

CRICKET TOURNNEY DATE OF NORTHERN INDIA MATCHES

(From Our Correspondent.)
Lahore, Nov.

At a meeting to-day of the Executive Committee of the Northern India Quadrangular Cricket Tournament, a sub-committee was appointed for the purpose of formulating suggestions to reduce expenditure and to increase income for the future. It was finally decided to hold it, if possible, from Saturday, January 30, 1926, the decision of the basis on which the fixture should be run was the last item on agenda. It was at first suggested that the teams should be formed territorially, that is to say, one to consist of players between Peshawar and Jhelum, another between Jhelum and Amritsar, and a third between Amritsar and Delhi, but in order to make the sides as equal as possible, it was also suggested that four teams should take part, comprising Europeans, Punjab States, Punjab University, and the Rest. A majority of the Committee eventually agreed to hold the competition on a communal basis as before.

CORRUPT PRACTICES PROPOSED BILL SUPPORTED BY MADRAS CHAMBER

Madras, Nov.

The Madras Chamber of Commerce have addressed a letter to the local Government on the proposed Corrupt Practices Bill. In the opinion of the Chamber the Bill is both necessary and desirable.

CHANDPUR JUTE BLAZE

Chandpur, Nov.

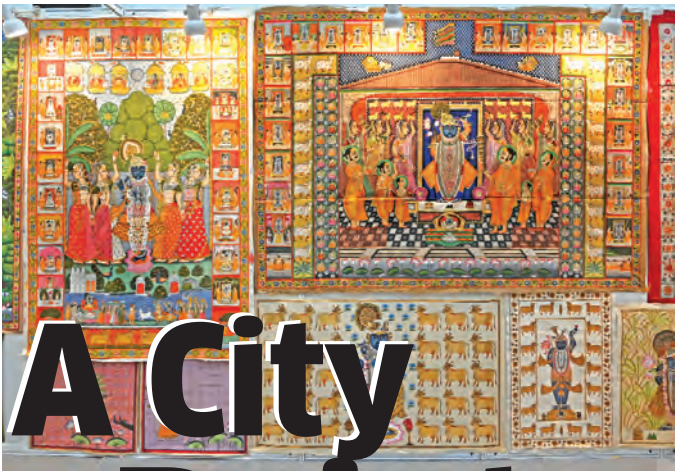
A fire broke out in the evening of November 3, at the jute import godown of Messrs. Landale and Clarke and Co. The total loss is estimated to be over Rs. 70,000.



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THE FESTIVAL BRINGS TOGETHER GALLERIES AND ARTISTS, CONNECTING NEW TALENT WITH MASTER ARTISTS



A City Painted

The India Art Festival 2025 transforms spaces into a lively canvas, where artists, galleries, and audiences celebrate Indian creativity, says SAKSHI PRIYA

Where Does Art Begin And Where Does It Take Us? From the first lines on cave walls to the bold abstractions of contemporary canvases, art has always been humanity's instinctive language.

Long before words or scripts, people painted what they saw, felt, and feared. Prehistoric handprints in Bhimbetka or the frescoes of Ajanta captured memory, imagination, and emotion. Art has always been about connection between artist and viewer, past and present, silence and expression. Art challenges us to see the world differently, offering spaces where perception, thought, and feeling converge. This is precisely what the India Art Festival 2025 — A National Celebration of Contemporary Indian Art achieves, presenting a platform where creativity flows across generations, regions, and traditions.

This edition brings together artists and galleries from Hyderabad to Mumbai, Mumbai to Kolkata, and Kolkata to Delhi, creating a national dialogue in contemporary art. Visitors encounter a remarkable variety of mediums and visions as they move from one exhibit to another.

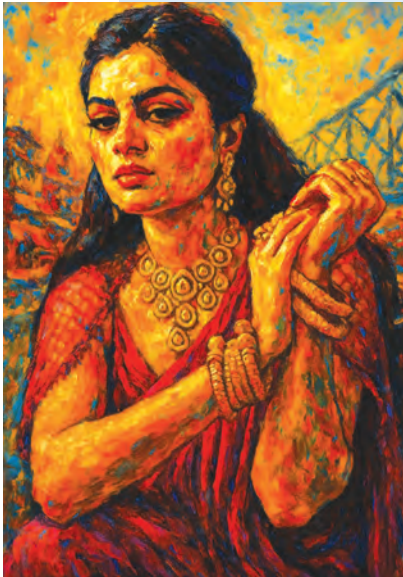
One striking work, 'Harnessing Chaos', balances photographic precision with painterly abstraction. Movement and disorder converge into form, prompting the question: How do we find order in chaos? Can turbulent moments transform into insight?

The piece captures the tension between control and spontaneity, inviting reflection on how we navigate uncertainty. In contrast, Ajit Ooviyar's canvases radiate colour and energy, exploring harmony through vibrant strokes. Parul Jain's modern texture works draw attention to the materiality of paint itself, layering surfaces to create depth. Sonia Verma's black-and-white series, accented with subtle red, conveys restrained intensity, questioning how simplicity can hold power. A Durga-inspired Madhubani painting blends tradition with contemporary interpretation, portraying courage, strength, and resilience. Aarti Studio's 'Quiet Beauty of Thought' examines contemplation through texture, inviting viewers to engage with their

own impressions. Each work encourages interpretation, prompting reflection on the surfaces, colours, and forms that surround us.

Standing before a canvas, viewers are invited to interpret, question, and reflect. Each artwork sparks thought and imagination, prompting personal responses to texture, colour, and form. Every painting becomes a mirror for our own emotions and ideas.

The IAF 2025, under the direction of Minakshi Patil, is at the Constitution Club of India, New Delhi, and continues till today, offering audiences the chance to stand before the artworks, interpret their meanings, and engage directly with the evolving narrative of contemporary Indian art.



Reviving the timeless art of Dastangoi



GYANESHWAR DAYAL

When the noted historian Yuval Noah Harari says that stories made the human race what it is, he has a point. Indeed, stories are inseparable from human existence; from the earliest times, they have helped shape human civilisation. Over time, the art of storytelling became more refined and compelling. The Urdu tradition of storytelling, *Dastangoi*, is a case in point—engaging, captivating, almost addictive. Centuries ago, in the bustling bazaars of Mughal India, crowds would gather under flickering lamplight as a lone storyteller began: "Ek tha Dastan—there was once a tale..." With a sweep of his robe and a glint in his eye, he would conjure empires, djinns, and lovers out of thin air.

The audience, spellbound, would forget where the story ended and life began. That was the magic of *Dastangoi*—the ancient Urdu art of storytelling that turned words

into worlds. This timeless tradition was brought beautifully back to life at Le Meridien New Delhi, where Dastangoi—Gharwali, performed by celebrated artists Sunil Mehra and Pallav Mishra, transported guests into the wry, witty, and fiercely human world of Ismat Chughtai.

Rooted in 13th-century Persian origins and later flourishing in the Mughal courts, Dastangoi—from dastan (story) and goi (telling)—was once the beating heart of oral culture. These tales of valour, trickery, romance, and philosophy were performed in marketplaces and royal durbars alike, where the storyteller's only tools were voice, gesture, and imagination.

Mehra and Mishra's performance reimaged this legacy with contemporary sensibility. Every pause, glance, and word pulsed with emotion, reminding the audience that *Dastangoi* is not about grand sets—it is about the human voice weaving magic in the air.



PHOTOS: PANKAJ KUMAR

Devotional dialogue dazzles



SAKSHI PRIYA

Some performances rise above the familiar format of a concert and become a contemplative experience. *Tu ka Mhane Kahe Kabira*, presented by Pancham Nishad Creatives at Kamani Auditorium, was an evening where poetry, philosophy, and music converged to explore the essence of Bhakti.

The presentation brought together the spiritual legacies of SantTukaram and SantKabir, representing two schools of devotion—Saguna, which worships the divine in form, and Nirguna, which seeks the formless truth. Though separated by

time and region, their verses share a reflection on human faith and inner seeking. Ranjani and Gayatri presented Tukaram's Abhangwani with emotional intensity, blending lyrical devotion with vocal precision.

Their rendering of Tukaram's verses carried the intimacy of prayer and the discipline of classical form.

In contrast, Bhuvanesh Komkali's Kabirwani reflected an austere beauty, his restrained style allowing Kabir's words to shine through with unembellished clarity. The accompaniment by Mandar Puranik on tabla, Krushna Salunke on pakhawaj, and Anurodh Jain on rhythm created a balanced, textured sound-

scape. Dhanashree Lele's narration provided philosophical context, explaining how both saints, though rooted in different traditions, spoke of the same quest for unity with the divine. Her commentary gave structure to the dialogue between Saguna and Nirguna Bhakti, helping the audience grasp the intellectual and spiritual depth of the compositions.

By the end, *Tu ka Mhane Kahe Kabira* left the audience thoughtful and deeply moved. It succeeded in transforming devotional music into an inquiry into truth and devotion, demonstrating how ancient philosophy can find expression through disciplined artistry and contemporary performance.

PHOTOS: PANKAJ KUMAR



Layers of thought, lines of light

SAKSHI PRIYA

What is it that an artist truly confronts when she stands before a blank canvas—the world, or herself? Bharati Shah's *Rubaru*, on view at Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi, invites that very confrontation—an intimate meeting between mind, matter, and movement. The exhibition, her 68th and 16th solo show, reflects Shah's lifelong engagement with abstraction, colour, and consciousness. Painting for over three decades, she does not confine herself to themes. "I don't get inspired by any theme or anybody. What comes to my mind is just pure mind," she said. Her process is instinctive, with no planning or calendar-driven compulsion. "I have at least seven, eight exhibitions a year and only when I have exhibitions, I go out; otherwise, I'm in my studio working. Ten hours a

day I work." The works in *Rubaru* are vivid and contemplative—acrylics on Italian linen and canvas that shift between stillness and energy. Gratitude 1, expansive and breathing, opens like an offering, its brushwork deliberate yet spontaneous. *Jal Thal Nabh 2* carries a cosmic temperament, its palette reflecting the meeting of water, earth, and sky—an unbroken continuum of existence.

Colour becomes language in *Vermillion Sun 2*, where warmth spills across the frame in waves that seem to radiate memory. In contrast, *Midnight Blues 1* is an inward whisper—indigo layered with reflection, a nocturnal space where light and thought coexist. Shah's *Harmony 2* is a quieter symphony, a visual arrangement that feels like listening to silence itself. When asked how she wishes her visitors to perceive these works, her reply was immediate: "When I finish a painting, I'm done with it. I want them to have their own perspective and make their own story. And I like to listen to what they are."

This openness turns her exhibition into a dialogue. Every viewer becomes a co-creator, completing the artwork through personal reflection. Her world is filled with colour, literally and philosophically. "It's a temple, it's really colourful," she said, describing one of her pieces.

"Everything is colourful—our moods, our clothes, our flowers, our way of life. Everywhere you see colours." Her canvases bring this sensory abundance alive. Works such as *Serenity 2* and *Solace* move through delicate transitions of light, invoking quiet renewal, while *Doors and Windows 2* and *Brahma the Creator* play with form and suggestion, offering glimpses into inner and outer thresholds.

Though her works bear traces of cubist structure—a lineage tracing back to Picasso and Braque—Shah approaches the form intuitively, independent of its history. "I stumbled upon it not knowing the history behind it," she said. "It allows me to explore and understand my mind without being tied down by any parameters. I am free to create not what my eyes see but what is deep in my soul." *Rubaru* in Urdu means face-to-face—an encounter. Shah's exhibition is exactly that: an encounter with the unseen currents that move within us. The viewer stands before each work as one stands before a mirror—without expectation, without direction, yet inevitably transformed.



FOR HER, PAINTING IS AN ACT OF HEALING. EACH STROKE BECOMES A GESTURE OF RELEASE, AN ARTICULATION OF THE UNSAID. THE PLAY OF COLOUR IN HER WORK IS EMOTIONAL VOCABULARY, SHAPING EXPERIENCE THROUGH LIGHT AND TONE



PHOTOS: PANKAJ KUMAR

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The Pioneer AGENDA

Politics is the art of looking for trouble, finding it whether it exists or not, and applying the wrong remedy
- Ernest Benn



THE ASPIRATIONAL STATES

In 2025, Jharkhand, Uttarakhand, and Chhattisgarh mark 25 years since their formation-states born of aspirations for self-determination, better governance, and inclusive growth. Over the past quarter-century, each has charted a unique path, balancing economic development with cultural preservation and environmental challenges. As they celebrate this milestone, it is a moment to reflect on their journey of transformation, shaped by resilience, reforms, and the relentless spirit of their people

Jharkhand: A story of resilience & renewal

Jharkhand, one of India's youngest states, completes 25 years of its formation in 2025, a journey marked by courage, hard work, and transformation. From its birth to today, the state's progress reflects the determination of its people to build a distinct identity and a better future, despite many challenges.

Historical Background and Formation

The dream of a separate Jharkhand existed long before the state was officially created on November 15, 2000. With its rich tribal culture, abundant minerals, and unique traditions, the region always had a strong sense of identity. The demand for a separate state grew stronger in the 1970s under the leadership of the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM), which voiced the aspirations of tribal and local communities for political rights and fair economic development. This dream finally came true with the Bihar Reorganisation Bill, 2000, which separated 18 southern districts of Bihar to form Jharkhand - India's 28th state. It was both the fulfilment of a long struggle and the beginning of a new chapter in self-governance and planned development.

The Naxal Challenge: Courage, Sacrifice, and Determination

From its inception, Jharkhand faced one of India's toughest internal security challenges — Left-Wing Extremism (LWE), or Naxalism. Extremist groups tried to exploit the region's difficult terrain and social inequalities, leading to years of violence and loss.

Official records show that since 2000, 551 police personnel have lost their lives in anti-Naxal operations, and around 823 civilians have been killed in extremist attacks. Landmines, ambushes, and assaults on police camps created fear, while schools, health centres, and local governance suffered in affected areas.

Yet, in the face of this adversity, the Jharkhand Police and local people demonstrated extraordinary courage and commitment. Security forces worked in dangerous conditions with limited resources but stood firm to uphold law and order. As former Chief of State Police, I had the privilege of witnessing this journey closely. I saw police vehicles being blown apart and senior officers, including District SPs, targeted in ambushes. But I also witnessed the unmatched bravery of officers and jawans who continued to serve with dedication, often at great personal risk.

The police understood that the fight against Naxalism could not be won by force alone. Alongside strong security measures, they focused on communication and trust-building. Cultural campaigns like the street play "Phir Ek Nayee



RAJEEV KUMAR
Former DGP, Jharkhand

Subah Hooee" and the film "Pratyavartan" highlighted the futility of violence and motivated misguided youth to return to normal life. These creative efforts were widely appreciated for their positive impact on society.

Through intelligence-based operations, cooperation with central agencies, and effective rehabilitation programmes, extremist networks were gradually weakened. Once-dangerous areas such as Jhumra Pahar, Prasanth Hills, Saranda, and Burha Pahar were freed and brought back into the fold of governance and development.

Today, Naxal influence has shrunk to only a few isolated pockets, thanks to years of coordinated security efforts and growing public confidence in democratic and developmental processes. The story of Jharkhand's fight against extremism is not just about law and order — it is a story of human courage, sacrifice, and the

strength of democratic resolve.

Political Evolution and Governance

Jharkhand's political journey has seen frequent changes in leadership and coalition governments, reflecting its social diversity and evolving democracy. While this sometimes caused policy disruptions and administrative instability, it also allowed representation for different regions and communities.

In recent years, greater political stability has led to more consistent governance, better financial management, and improved coordination among government departments. These changes have strengthened institutions and helped the state focus more effectively on development.

Economic and Infrastructure Growth

Jharkhand holds over 37 per cent of India's mineral wealth, making it a key contributor to the country's industrial economy. Turning this mineral strength into broad-based prosperity has been challenging due to environmental and regulatory hurdles.

CONTINUED ON >> PII

Chhattisgarh: At a turning point of growth

Chhattisgarh recently celebrated its 25th foundation day. Like a 25-year-old youth, the state too is advancing toward a strong identity and economic self-reliance. Born out of Madhya Pradesh, it is striving to embrace modernisation while preserving its rich cultural heritage — a journey filled with both opportunities and challenges.

Economic Progress, Opportunities, and Challenges

The economic growth of Chhattisgarh has been remarkable. In the fiscal year 2022-23, the state's Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) grew by 8 per cent, higher than the national average. The government allocated 39 per cent of its total budget toward social welfare. The unemployment rate places Chhattisgarh fifth in the country, yet behind this positive statistic lies the issue of underemployment and skill mismatch. The imbalance between youth potential and industrial demand remains a concern.

To bridge this gap, the state launched robotics and artificial-intelligence courses from 2024-25, preparing its youth for global competitiveness.



GANESH SHANKAR MISHRA
Retd. IAS Officer; served as Principal Secretary, Chhattisgarh

However, in rural and tribal regions, the weak infrastructure of primary and secondary education continues to be a major challenge.

Agriculture remains the backbone of the state's economy, providing employment to 77 per cent of the population. Fertile soil, diverse climate, and abundant water resources make it suitable for high-income crops. For increasing agricultural income, the development of micro-irrigation, organic farming, warehousing, and agro-processing industries is essential.

Chhattisgarh's mineral wealth is both a boon and a challenge. While mining and industry fuel the economy, they often lead to environmental degradation, displacement, and the resurgence of Naxalism.

The Fight Against Naxalism

Union Home Minister Amit Shah has set a target to make Chhattisgarh Naxal-free by March 2026, sym-

bolising the government's unwavering commitment. The end of Naxalism will open new doors for industry, services, and investment.

Operations such as Octopus, Double Bull, and Chakrabandha have achieved remarkable success. Security forces have established permanent camps in remote forest regions.

In 2025 alone, 270 Naxals were neutralized, 680 arrested, and 1,225 surrendered. Major missions like Operation Black Forest and mass surrenders in Bijapur, Chhattisgarh, and Maharashtra reflect the growing confidence among insurgents to return to the mainstream.

Security agencies now employ cutting-edge technologies for precise monitoring and analysis of Naxal activities — including location tracking, mobile data analysis, call-log examination, social-media analytics, and AI-based data systems.

Collaboration with forensic and technical institutions has strengthened the intelligence framework.

Drone surveillance and satellite imaging have brought unprecedented improvements in operational accuracy.

With the continued cooperation between the Centre and the State, India is steadily moving toward becoming completely Naxal-free by March 2026 - a testament to decisive governance and unwavering resolve.

Now, Bastar needs a strong alternative development model so that it never regresses to its earlier conditions.

Gone are the days when exchanging salt for chironji and tendu leaves was a matter of pride. The people of Bastar deserve dignified livelihoods and better living conditions. Industrialisation of Bastar must go hand in hand with the preservation of its natural and cultural identity. The government is now taking decisive steps to free Bastar from the grip of Naxalism.

A Morning from 2006 - An Administrative Memory

In 2006, discussions were held with Tata Steel to set up a 5.5-million-ton steel plant. The then Chief Minister Dr Raman Singh had a clear vision — to free Bastar from Naxalism through development and industrialisation. I recall that in June 2006, when I was the Collector of Rajnandgaon, Dr Raman Singh told me over the phone:

"I am sending you there with a big responsibility." After becoming District Magistrate of Bastar, I worked with the district administration and police to translate his vision into reality. Since the region falls under Schedule V (tribal area), land acquisition required approval from Gram Sabhas under the PESA Act. Within a week of assuming charge, 6 out of 10 Gram Sabhas granted consent, and within the next week, the remaining 4 followed.

CONTINUED ON >> PII

Uttarakhand: Development and challenges redefined

As Uttarakhand marks its 25th year of statehood, it is apt to reflect on its journey; the achievements, the evolving landscape, and the work still ahead. From infrastructure to tourism, from power to industrialisation, the hills have witnessed lot of transformation. Yet the fragile Himalayan ecology and the aspirations of its people demand that this progress be both sustainable and inclusive.

Infrastructure & Connectivity

When Uttarakhand was created in 2000, its infrastructure base in many remote and mountainous areas was modest. Over the past quarter-century the state has made very tangible strides.

The road network has expanded significantly. According to recent data, the total road length in the state has increased from under 20,000 km to over 45,000 km. Similarly, the rail network is coming up to Karnprayag. Aerial connectivity has also improved. Now, we can't call Uttarakhand a remotely connected state.

These improvements have unlocked many opportunities; for access to markets, for tourism, for medical and educational reach. Yet challenges like landslides, terrain constraints and remote hamlets still remain.

Road Network in the Hills

Beyond the aggregate numbers, what stands out is how connectivity has improved:



ASHOK KUMAR
Former DGP, Uttarakhand

Uttarakhand. This would not have been possible in a large state like Uttar Pradesh.

Still, given the mountainous terrain, maintenance costs and environmental risks (like landslides and weather damage) persist. The state has to continuously invest in resilient infrastructure.

Heli-Services & Air Connectivity

One significant leap has been the expansion of heli-services, which are crucial in the hills.

The state government has started heli-services from many of its planned heliports, 12 out of 18 already operational.

These services not only aid pilgrimage tourism and adventure travel, but also act as lifelines during

natural calamities and emergencies.

However, the expansion also carries safety and environmental implications: high altitude operations, weather vulnerability, and the risk of overuse in environmentally sensitive zones. This calls for strict standards, rigorous monitoring and sustainable planning.

Power Generation & Energy Access

Access to reliable power is a foundation of modern development, and Uttarakhand has advanced considerably in this domain.

The distribution utility figures show strong growth: number of consumers, contracted load and lines all increasing substantially. For example, the state distribution company's input energy rose from 3,038 MU to 17,200 MU.

In the generation sphere, the state is pushing both hydro and solar. Under its Solar Energy Policy 2023 it has targeted 2,500 MW of solar capacity.

Meanwhile, hydropower projects aim to increase capacity significantly by 2031.

But the challenge remains: ensuring that remote villages, especially in the high hills, have reliable access, and that power infrastructure growth doesn't come at the cost of ecosystems or local livelihoods.

Industrialisation & Economy

From a largely under-industrialised region, Uttarakhand has evolved markedly in its economic base.

CONTINUED ON >> PII

WHEN ASPIRATIONS ARE CARVED ON A MAP

A quarter of a century ago, India's map was redrawn to realise long-cherished dreams, giving birth to Jharkhand, Uttarakhand, and Chhattisgarh. Each arose from a deep desire for self-governance, recognition, and development rooted in local identity. Twenty-five years on, these "states of aspirations" stand as living testaments to the struggles and hopes of their people-charting distinct journeys, facing unique challenges, and redefining what it means for aspirations to take the shape of a state.

“CLIMATE CHANGE IS THE GREATEST
THREAT TO OUR EXISTENCE IN OUR
SHORT HISTORY ON THIS PLANET”
— MARK RUFFALO

Climate change & Indian agenda for COP30

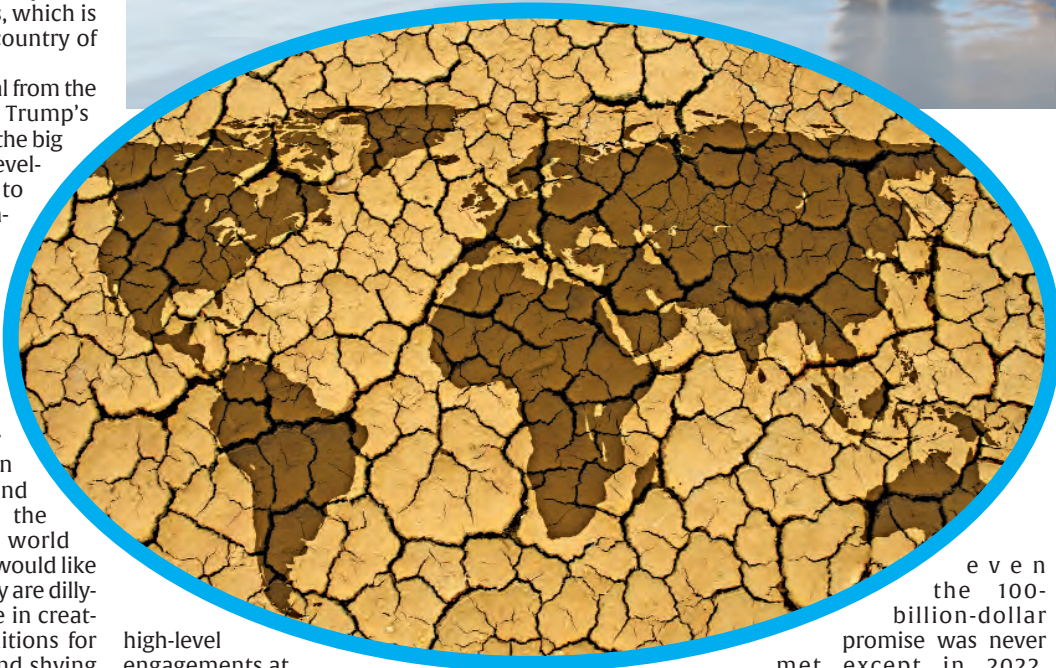
VK BAHUGUNA

The 30th United Nations Conference of Parties (COP-30) for Climate Change is slated to begin in Belém, Brazil, from 10th November to 21st November. The conference, like previous conferences, is very critical for taking stock of achievements on Paris commitments, and the entire world will be watching the proceedings and the end results. Special focus will be on the Biennial Transparency Report (BTR) released by the UNFCCC Secretariat, which has flagged the tardy progress and need to step up to evolve a broader strategy through the collective endeavours of the member nations, especially when the global temperature has for the first time breached the 1.5°C threshold this calendar year. However, the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) synthesis report released on 28th October 2025 lists out positive achievements in reducing emissions. India, in June 2025, had already achieved 50 per cent of its goal of meeting its power requirements from non-fossil fuels, which is a big milestone for a developing country of more than 143 crore people.

After the United States' withdrawal from the Paris Agreement under President Trump's administration, COP30 must bridge the big geopolitical differences between developed and developing countries to forge concrete, implementable pathways within the fore corner of common but differentiated responsibilities. In an era of extreme weather observed over the last ten years, the climatic vagaries have ravaged economies and displaced millions. These elements underscore the conference's role not as an annual ritual, but as a linchpin for equitable survival. This writer, as an Indian battling climatic extremes and observing the damages done to the environment by the developed world during the previous two centuries, would like to ask the developed world why they are dilly-dallying in not accepting their role in creating such disastrous climatic conditions for present and future generations, and shying away from providing the technology and the needed finances rather than harping on India and China for being the major emitters. In fact, if they agree on these two fundamentals, then India should be prepared to start climate-resilient administration from top to bottom to meet emission reduction and upscale mitigation and adaptation across landscapes. This writer, on moral grounds, does not believe in the principle of buying carbon credits by developing worlds from poor countries to offset their emissions, but practically it has become a norm now, though not very successful.

Having said this, one of the urgent needs for the COP30 negotiators is to take note of the Global Stocktake (GST) of COP28, which inter alia revealed that current national commitments would yield only a 10 per cent emissions reduction by 2030-far short of the 45 per cent needed to align with the 1.5°C threshold.

The conference's Brazil setting underscores the nexus of biodiversity, emissions, and equity, demanding differentiated yet collaborative roles from key actors. Therefore, Brazil, as head of the COP, had described it as an 'implementation COP', urging nations to deeply integrate the GST into national policy, especially to end acrimony on the issue of climate finance. As far as Indian views are concerned diplomatically, India has laid bare its stance through



high-level engagements at the UN General Assembly briefing. Ambassador Ruchira Kamboj voiced "deep disappointment" over COP29's finance shortfall, vowing to champion scaled-up, grant-based flows under common but differentiated responsibilities. It would be appropriate to discuss COP30 from the point of view of India's national interests.

The Indian delegation must assert to seek 'Climate Justice and Equity', leading the voice of the Global South in tandem with Like-Minded Developing Countries (LMDCs) and G77+China, and rightfully rejecting the 300-billion-dollar finance as 'eye wash and optical illusion', as



even the 100-billion-dollar promise was never met except in 2022.

Therefore, again, India should push for more than 1 trillion dollars in funds, along with accountability, transparency, and no dilution of CBDR through uniform reporting on developing nations. As demanded in COP29 regarding Intellectual Property Rights (IPR), there should be free access to green technologies without IPR barriers, enabling deployment in sectors like renewable energy, adaptation, and methane mitigation. The Indian government, while taking proactive steps as this writer has been suggesting, needs to ask for grants for climatically vulnerable areas like the Sundarbans, Northeast India, and the Western Ghats.

From the point of view of civil society, COP30 must recognise that mitigation and adaptation will have no credible progress without the active and purposeful involvement of civil society, especially marginalised sections. NGOs and other civil society groups, especially those working at grassroots levels, quite often feel aggrieved for not being consulted in preparation before the COPs and NDCs. Further, the forest department plays a key role in climate change mitigation and adapta-

tion, but they are never consulted, especially on strategy regarding Agriculture, Forests and Other Land Use (AFOLU), though AFOLU supports the livelihoods of billions of people. There are many people and organisations in India advocating for including AFOLU under Para 6.2 and Para 6.4 of Article 6 of the Paris Agreement. Para 6.2 provides guidance to countries to use internationally transferred mitigation outcomes towards their climate commitments. Para 6.4 creates a United Nations-supervised mechanism for issuing carbon credits with finances to emission-reducing projects. AFOLU, however, is a double-edged weapon: on one hand, it is a major source of anthropogenic greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, contributing approximately 20-24 per cent of total global emissions; on the other hand, AFOLU offers immense mitigation potential through carbon sequestration and emission reductions, making it essential for Paris Agreement goals of limiting warming to 1.5-2°C. The IPCC's Sixth Assessment Report stressed AFOLU's role in delivering co-benefits like biodiversity conservation, food security, and adaptation to climate impacts, but warns of trade-offs such as competition for land with bio-energy, etc. The Indian government has excluded agriculture from its emission intensity reduction target of 45 per cent by 2030 from the year 2005 and instead is focusing on the energy and industry sectors, though forestry, however, is included as a sink, with commitments to create an additional carbon sink of 2.5-3 billion tonnes of CO2 by 2030. The government may have its own reasons, primarily due to socio-economics, equity, and food security for livelihoods. As seen during previous COP discussions, excluding agriculture from NDCs and carbon markets avoids "trade coercion" that might hinder developmental rights. However, this writer feels that the Government of India must allow agroforestry as an internal mechanism to get carbon credit through Corporate Social Responsibility and government-funded projects so that farmers' income can be bolstered along with meeting mitigation goals. The Prime Minister has unequivocally reiterated that farmers' interests will never be compromised. The Indian delegation must declare this in COP30 along with other steps like a climate-resilient, bottom-up development approach.

(The writer is former Director-General, ICFRE, in the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change)

A marriage rooted in green values



ANIMESH CHAUDHARY

In the serene village of Samode near Jaipur, a quiet revolution in matrimonial tradition unfolded on Saturday as two young professionals redefined what a modern Hindu marriage can embody. Amid the rustle of peacocks and the winter sky, Pooja Malik and Lakshya Pawan Shyam Kaura celebrated a union free from dowry, expectations, or demands, an intimate gathering grounded in values rather than valuables.

Both accomplished in their own right: Lakshya, a Princeton University graduate, and Pooja, an alumna of MICA, Ahmedabad, and Lady Irwin College, the couple exemplifies a generation that harmonizes global learning with Indian ethics. Their families, rooted in equality and mutual respect, chose a wedding that prioritised conscience over consumption.

In a symbolic gesture, the fathers of the bride and groom exchanged a bonsai planter, marking their commitment to a zero-dowry union. The couple also planted a sapling near the mandap, while each of the thirty guests received seed packets to nurture at home- a living reminder that meaningful change begins with small and deliberate actions.

"This Green Marriage celebrates not wealth, but values; not consumption, but contribution. It is a quiet revolution in how India can celebrate love responsibly," said Sanjiv Kaura, father of the groom.

By rejecting extravagant displays and traditional transactional customs, the families emphasised simplicity, sustainability, and social responsibility. The ceremony sent a clear message that modern weddings can honour love, equality, and environmental stewardship simultaneously. The couple have shown that weddings need not be a spectacle of consumption but can be powerful statements of conscience, sowing seeds, both literally and metaphorically for a future where dignity, respect and sustainability flourish under one canopy of love.



(The author is government consultant)

FROM AGENDA COVER

Jharkhand: A story...

Even so, recent years have seen steady progress. Better roads, railways, airports, and power projects have improved connectivity and encouraged investment. The government's focus on renewable energy, agro-industries, and new manufacturing sectors has helped diversify the economy beyond mining. Transparent policies, public-private partnerships, and an emphasis on value addition are driving balanced and sustainable growth.

Jharkhand is now moving from being merely a supplier of raw materials to a state focused on industrial modernization and equitable development.

Social and Rural Development

Jharkhand remains deeply rooted in its villages and forests. The state's approach to development emphasizes education, healthcare, women's empowerment, and rural livelihoods.

Through Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and community-based missions, many tribal and rural families have been connected to livelihood programmes and small-scale entrepreneurship. Skill development and digital services are helping bridge gaps in employment and governance. Improved roads, electricity, and health outreach have brought visible change even in remote areas, reflecting the government's effort to make progress inclusive and people-centred.

Future Prospects and Aspirations

As Jharkhand enters its next 25 years, it stands ready for faster growth built on peace, stability, and sustainable development. The restoration of law and order in former conflict areas has created a strong foundation for new industries and investments.

The state's future goals include industrial diversification, clean energy, eco-tourism, and human resource development. With a young population and growing stability, Jharkhand aims to combine its natural wealth with innovation and entrepreneurship to become a model of inclusive growth.

The key challenge will be to maintain a

balance between economic growth, social justice, and environmental protection - ensuring that progress benefits all without harming nature.

Conclusion

The story of Jharkhand at 25 is one of resilience, renewal, and hope. From years of struggle and underdevelopment, a confident and forward-looking state has emerged. The bravery of its security forces, the dedication of its officials, and the hard work of its citizens have together shaped Jharkhand's success.

They have turned adversity into opportunity and aspiration into achievement. As Jharkhand steps into its next 25 years, it carries forward a proud legacy - of sacrifice, perseverance, and promise - with faith that peace, development, and dignity for all will continue to guide its path.

Chhattisgarh: At a turning point of growth

Subsequently, the land acquisition process began, and in record time - within two months - compensation exceeding ₹55 crore was distributed to landowners for the acquired barren land.

To ensure better health, education, and employment opportunities for Bastar's residents, an MoU with Tata Group was also signed. It included provisions for a super-specialty hospital, premium schools, an engineering college, and employment opportunities for local youth.

However, due to bureaucratic hurdles at higher administrative levels, the project could not progress. Tragically, that acquired barren land later became a victim of political opportunism, and its return to its multiple landowners was publicised as an achievement - but in my view, it was a severe setback to Bastar's growth and prosperity.

I consider it a major lost opportunity - this project could have transformed Bastar's destiny and naturally eradicated Naxalism.

Today, the vision of a Naxal-free India is yielding tangible results.

This is truly a sunrise moment for Bastar. What

is now needed is a robust developmental roadmap so that this time, the "take-off" becomes a real flight.

If Chhattisgarh utilizes this opportunity wisely, it can emerge as a leading pillar of a developed India by 2047.

Then one could truly say - "Chhattisgarhiya, sable badhiya!"

(The people of Chhattisgarh - the best of all!)

Uttarakhand: development and...

The number of MSMEs in the state has grown to approx. 80,000 new businesses over the last 25 years, with investment of over Rs 17,000 crore.

The manufacturing sector now contributes about one-third of the state's GDP.

The state's promotion of horticulture, forests, medicinal & aromatic plants, and associated processing industries shows potential for eco-friendly industrialisation.

But caution is required i.e., heavy, large-scale industry especially in fragile hill zones, must be carefully regulated. The state's strength should lie in small, green, local industries that preserve ecology and generate local jobs.

Policing: Humane, Tech-Savvy, Efficient

Another positive narrative has been the transformation in law enforcement and public safety. The state police has come up to SMART police vision of Hon'ble Prime Minister.

The state police is increasingly using technology: digital systems, drone surveillance, cyber-units, special task forces etc.

Public-friendly measures, community policing initiatives and improved responsiveness are helping make the force more citizen-friendly.

Health & Education in the Hills: The Work Ahead

While much has improved, the hills of Uttarakhand still face gaps in health and education. Schools, colleges and medical facilities have expanded, but many high-altitude and remote

villages remain underserved.

Challenges include: attracting and retaining qualified teachers and doctors, providing year-round access (roads and power disruptions hamper this), and tailoring education & health services to the specific needs of hill communities.

This is a key priority: without strong human? capacity infrastructure, the other gains risk being undercut by migration, brain?drain and out-flow of youth.

The Industrialisation Choice: Eco-Friendly Only

Given Uttarakhand's unique Himalayan environment, there is a strong imperative to choose the right kind of industry.

Large heavy-industry projects like steel plants, major chemical plants, massive factory complexes carry high risks of environmental degradation, biodiversity loss, landslide triggers and unsustainable migration.

The state's future lies better in eco-friendly industries: small manufacturing, value-added forest products, medicinal plant processing, rural crafts, agro-processing, green tourism services, and clean energy components.

Policy must emphasise: low? impact footprint, local employment, minimal environmental harm, respect for ecology & culture, and alignment with carrying? capacity of the mountain ecosystem.

Tourism: Rapid Growth with a Caveat

Tourism has been perhaps the most visible growth story in Uttarakhand but also the most delicate.

The numbers are staggering: over 23 crore (230 million) tourist visits in the past three years.

The state's "homestay scheme" has been highly successful: more than 6,000 registered homestay operators are benefitting in rural and hill zones.

Tourism has diversified beyond the marquee hill stations to remote destinations, adventure circuits, and lesser-known valleys. This spreads economic benefit more widely.

But caution is needed: "blind tourism" meaning unplanned, over-intensive tourist

flows, infrastructure strain, ecological stress, social displacement must be avoided. The hills have finite carrying capacity. References warn about environmental risk from unregulated growth.

The homestay model, responsible tourism, smaller-scale circuits, local participation must be the template going forward.

Concluding Reflections & The Road Forward

As Uttarakhand completes 25 years as a state, the narrative is one of proud transformation i.e., better roads, better connectivity, increased tourism, growing industries, improved power access, more responsive governance. But the story is not complete, and indeed, given the fragile terrain and unique challenges of the Himalayas, the next phase must be conscious, sustainable and inclusive.

- Key imperatives for the next 25 years include:
- Ensuring health and education systems reach every village, especially remote hill clusters.
- Prioritising eco-friendly industries, rather than heavy industrialisation that may damage the ecosystem.
- Managing tourism in a way that respects local culture, ecology and infrastructure limits, maintaining balance between growth and carrying capacity.
- Strengthening infrastructure and power access, but doing so while mitigating environmental risk (landslides, glaciers, habitat disruption).
- Enhancing local employment, entrepreneurship in hill zones, so that people don't feel compelled to migrate to plains.
- Keeping governance responsive, policing citizen-centric, and public services high-tech yet rooted in local realities.

Uttarakhand has shown what is possible. The hills have come into sharper connectivity with the world. But the mountains are a gift. They demand custodianship. If the next 25 years lean into sustainable development with Himalayan wisdom, Uttarakhand will shine as a model of how mountain states can grow with dignity, ecology and equity.

THE ELECTORAL REPUBLIC OF VOTE BENEFIT TRANSFERS

INDIA'S political landscape is witness to an innovative private-public partnership model. The upgrades are rapid and arrive with every election. It enables nationalisation of costs and personalisation of political power. People pay taxes. Government collects them. The politicians choose a section of voters to please. As in George Orwell's farm, all are equal but some are more equal. Like in the stock market, derivatives deliver returns.

This is the electoral republic of vote benefit transfers. To appreciate, reflect on the headlines. The buzz is about a high turnout of voters led by women at the first phase in Bihar. This validates the grand idea of political parties. The woman voter is effectively the 'X Factor'—X because it is a silent vote, or maybe because the X chromosome has been scientifically proven to be more resilient.

The resilient gender, though, does not figure in ticket allocations—women account for less than 15 percent of MPs and less than 20 percent of MLAs. Sure, there is the promise of a 33 percent quota. Be that as it may, states are designing names for the monthly allowance of between ₹1,000 and ₹2,500, subject to conditions. Bihar became the 15th state to woo the X Factor! The cost of cash benefit transfers to women is now over ₹2 lakh crore.

Typically, states pay women a monthly allowance. In Bihar, the electoral calculus called for a bigger bang. The BJP-JD(U) combo devised the CM's employment scheme. The cash transfer of ₹10,000 to 75 lakh women was dressed as the first instalment of a potential ₹2 lakh kitty. As of now, Bihar has 179 schemes listed on DBT Bharat. A rattled RJD is offering ₹30,000 if elected.

Neelkanth Mishra, chief economist at Axis Bank, points out electoral sops are funded by expenditure switching. Mishra estimates, "Bihar spends around 2.9 percent of the state GDP on welfare schemes, the highest among all states." Voters know freebies are a free-now-pay-later gimmick, but like the Roman emperor Vespasian, they feel 'pecuina non olet'—money does not stink.

It is not just women, the youth too must be wooed. In a state that runs on migrant remittances, employment is a slogan. The NDA promises to create one crore jobs in five years. The RJD upped the ante—a government job for each of 2.3 crore households. The math—2.3 crore x ₹20,000 in Bihar's budget of ₹3 lakh crore is mind-numbing. Why must schemes wait for polls is an uncontested debate.

Ironically, perverse politics is enabled by systemic reforms. States are able to design and execute audacious schemes thanks to GST collections and the predictable availability of funding. Add systemic ease. Thanks to Aadhaar-enabled payments, governments can initiate instant transfer of cash to beneficiaries. All that is needed is registration of a code with National Payments Corporation and beneficiary details.

The Union government has 328 schemes vested with 56 ministries listed on DBT Bharat operating on the NPCI platform. There are 7,065 codes listed on NPCI for state and central schemes. Ease of delivery has perverse consequences. Unsurprisingly, the borrowings of states are higher and fiscal deficit is likely worse at over 3 percent. Madhavi Arora, economist at Emkay Global, cites the cause as "weak revenue mobilisation" worsened by "election-led focus on freebies/subsidies".

India's governance is gripped by a strange psychosis. The architecture of governance is focused on addressing consequences that hurt political interests, whereas there is little effort to address the causality that shackles people and the economy. This explains—in part, at least—the need for a flood of acronym soups in government of India documents. India spends ₹5.41 lakh crore on centrally-sponsored schemes and runs the world's largest programmes for food security, health insurance, rural jobs, rural housing, midday meals, and personal accident insurance.

The national rural employment guarantee law was enacted in 2005. Two decades later, India spends over ₹86,000 crore on the MGNREGS, and yet, the biggest issue in election after election is employment. In a nation where government jobs find lakhs of applicants, paradoxically, as per 2023 data, nearly 9 lakh posts were vacant at the Centre; the states have nearly a million posts vacant. There are over 1.04 lakh schools with just one teacher.

This winter session, the government will move a new bill to set the stage for a ₹1-lakh-crore bailout of state electricity boards, but this reality isn't halting free power. There are 35 different schemes listed on DBT Bharat for agriculture and farmers' welfare, and yet, the sector is perennially in distress and farmer suicides haunt headlines. India is the fourth largest economy, and yet, it must give 81 crore people free food because half the workforce survives on a sixth of national income. Primary preventive health care is inadequate, and hence, there's health insurance for 51 crore people.

Thanks to the rich vote harvest, states are borrowing more and spending less on critical services such as police, lower judiciary, health, and education. What could be the next electoral innovation to woo voters—air purifiers for Delhi, dehumidifiers for Mumbai, free wifi for students, Zomato or Swiggy coupons, weekend Airbnb deals? The brazen disregard for the long-term consequences of underspending on state capacity should chill the collective conscience; yet, all it triggers is a collective shrug.

Mao said power flows from the barrel of the gun. In India, power grows from the taxpayer's pocket.

ZOHRAN MAMDANI TROUNCES TRUMPISM



POWER & POLITICS

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IN the neon-drenched canyons of New York City, where skyscrapers pierce the heavens like defiant spears, a seismic shift has occurred. It echoed the thunderous collapse of empires past. Last week, Zohran Kwame Mamdani, a 34-year-old fiery democratic socialist, stormed to victory as the second-youngest mayor in the city's storied history. Born to an Indian Hindu mother, filmmaker Mira Nair, and a Ugandan Muslim father, academic Mahmood Mamdani, this son of immigrants didn't just win an election. He obliterated the remnants of Trumpism in its spiritual heartland. With 50.4 percent of the vote, Mamdani crushed former Governor Andrew Cuomo, running as a desperate independent, and Republican Curtis Sliwa.

This wasn't a mere ballot-box triumph. It was a brutal exorcism of Donald Trump's personalised politics, his toxic brew of division, and his so-called 'Trumpian economics'. Ironically, in this very city, where extreme terrorists brought down the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001, killing nearly 3,000 Americans and others in an act of unimaginable horror, voters have chosen to repose unyielding faith in multiculturalism. As the confetti fell and the crowds roared, one truth crystallised. America's flirtation with autocratic individualism is unravelling, and Trump's plummeting acceptance is the harbinger of his inevitable fall.

Trump's rise in 2016 was a carnival of chaos. He peddled fear as policy and identity as weaponry. He ascended on the backs of the dispossessed, promising walls against 'the others' and tax cuts for the elite disguised as populism. But less than a year into his second term, the cracks are widening into chasms. Mamdani's victory, coupled with

Democratic sweeps in other key races, exposes the fragility of Trump's grip. It's a national referendum on the man's corrosive legacy. Voters in the nation's largest city, a microcosm of America's diversity, rejected Trump's exclusionary toolkit with visceral force. Mamdani turned the race into a personal battleground of identities, where heritage became both shield and sword. However, this very emphasis on leftist ideals could exacerbate national divisions. Mamdani's policies threaten to weaken the fight against illegal immigration and balloon expenditures on social measures, potentially straining the city's and the country's resources at a time when prudence is paramount.

The campaign devolved into a raw clash of visions, with both men hurling barbs that laid bare the soul of American politics. Trump, ever the provocateur, attacked Mamdani's identity with the subtlety of a sledgehammer. In a Truth Social rant days before the election, Trump labelled Mamdani a "self-professed Jew hater" and declared that "any Jewish person who votes for him is a stupid person". It was classic Trump who stoked religious and ethnic fears to rally his base. He implied that Mamdani's Muslim heritage made him inherently suspect. Trump doubled down, accusing Mamdani of embodying "radical left identity politics that will destroy New York", tying him to supposed anti-American sentiments.

It was personal, vicious, and utterly predictable—a reflection of Trump's worldview where diversity is a threat, not a strength. Mamdani fired back with eloquence and cultural firepower that dismantled Trump's fortress of exclusion. In rally after rally, he invoked his biracial, interfaith roots as proof of America's promise. "My mother is Hindu, my father Muslim—I am the America Trump fears." But Mamdani's masterstroke came in channelling historical giants and cultural icons to eviscerate Trump's narrow nationalism.

Drawing from Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, Mamdani

quoted the independence leader's famous 'Tryst with destiny' speech. Adapting it to the American context, Mamdani thundered, "We build a noble city where all—Hindu, Muslim, Jew, Christian, atheist—dwell in unity, not the walled-off dystopia Trump peddles." It was a direct rebuke to Trump's 'America First' isolationism, invoking Nehru's vision of inclusive democracy to highlight how Trump's personalised rule fosters fragmentation.

To drive the point home, Mamdani wove in cultural threads that resonated with immigrant communities. At his victory celebration, as the crowd erupted, the Hindi song '*Dhoom machale*' from the Bollywood film *Dhoom* blasted through the speakers. This fusion of Nehru's idealism and Bollywood's vibrancy wasn't gimmickry. It was a powerful narrative that mobilised South Asian,

Muslim, and progressive voters, turning identity from a liability into a landslide catalyst. It was Mamdani's masterclass in marketing.

Mamdani's triumph doesn't stand alone. It's part of a broader Democratic resurgence that spells doom for Trump's authority. In Dearborn, Michigan, Abdullah Hamoud, a Lebanese-American Muslim,

secured reelection as mayor with a commanding margin, becoming a beacon for Arab-American communities weary of Trump's foreign policy blunders. Meanwhile, in Buffalo, New York, Democrat India Walton claimed victory as mayor. These electoral successes—three Democratic mayors, two of them Muslim—represent a stinging rebuke to Trumpism in urban strongholds.

Undoubtedly, the damage to Trump's authority is profound and multifaceted. Domestically, these losses weaken his grip on the Republican Party, where murmurs of dissent are growing louder. Midterm elections loom in 2026. With Democrats now controlling key cities and governorship like Abigail Spanberger in Virginia and Mikie Sherrill in New Jersey, the opposition has momentum. These victories embolden Democrats to counter Trump aggressively,

framing every policy fight as a battle against his "autocratic individualism".

Still, this cultural triumph masks potential pitfalls. Mamdani's expansive social agenda, including robust support for undocumented immigrants and ambitious welfare expansions, could undermine efforts to curb illegal crossings, inviting chaos at the borders, and fueling Trump's narrative of Democratic weakness on security. Mamdani's softening stances on immigration enforcement might erode public trust in border security which would provide Trump ammunition to reclaim lost ground.

Within the executive branch, Trump's influence wanes as these local leaders push back. Mamdani has already vowed to make New York a "sanctuary" against federal overreach. He has challenged Trump's deportation plans and economic policies head-on. This resistance, if sustained, could cascade, diminishing Trump's control over global economics and diplomacy. Trump's bombastic trade wars and isolationist stances rely on unified domestic support. With major cities in revolt, his leverage in negotiations with China or Europe evaporates. Allies abroad, already wary of his volatility, will see these defeats as evidence of his declining clout, making it harder to bully or bargain on the world stage.

Less than a year, Trump's second inning has devolved from triumphant return to desperate scramble. It proves that in a robust democracy, autocratic individualism—where one man's ego dictates policy—crumbles under the weight of collective will. But the victors, too, cannot afford complacency. Mamdani's leftist vision, if not balanced, risks fracturing the very diversity it celebrates, turning unity into polarised silos.

Looking forward, this could herald a Democratic renaissance, with figures like Mamdani inspiring a new generation to reclaim America's pluralistic soul, provided they navigate the down-sides wisely. If Democrats sustain this momentum while balancing ideology with fiscal and security prudence, the midterms could deliver a congressional flip. It would dilute Trump's agenda and hasten his political obsolescence.

The golden tower may still gleam, but its foundations are rotting. In the end, Trump's fall won't be with a bang, but with the quiet roar of diverse voices singing songs he could never understand—a fitting elegy for an era of excess.

SHOOTING STAR WHO LIT UP SCREENS & LIVES



OPINION

NAMRATA JOSHI
Consulting Editor
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ONE of the best times I have had at the movies was watching a newly-restored print of Ritwik Ghatak's 1958 film *Ajantrik* (known variously in English as *The Mechanical Man* or *The Pathetic Fallacy*) at the 2019 Pingyao International Film Festival in China. It felt entirely felicitous for a film about a man's love for his rundown car to play in a diesel-engine plant of Mao Zedong's times that had been redeveloped into a sprawling Festival Palace. The screening happened in the presence of one of Ghatak's beloved students, filmmaker Kumar Shahani, and the Chinese icon Jia Zhangke.

Ajantrik took the average Chinese

viewer—for whom Indian cinema seemed to begin and end with Aamir Khan's *Dangal* and *3 Idiots*—by surprise. That a 60-year-old black-and-white film could have them emotionally invested, all by humanising an inanimate object. For the young students of cinema, the man-machine dialectic, the formal experimentation, and especially the sound effects made the film way ahead of its time.

Ghatak's Chevrolet called 'Jagaddal' foreshadowed the Volkswagen Beetle in Disney's *Herbie* franchise without ever getting acknowledged. Much like Ghatak himself, who didn't get the recognition he deserved in his short lifetime of 50 years in which he made eight films. No wonder filmmaker Saeed Mirza, also his student at the Film and Television Institute of India in Pune, compares Ghatak to a shooting star that flashes past brightly before dying out.

His brief stewardship of the FTII in the late 1960s, the iconic Wisdom Tree in the FTII campus where he used to hold his addas with students—from Adoor Gopalakrishnan to Subhash Ghai—is the stuff of folklore. Ghai calls him his first guru. "He changed my perception of cinema. I had grown up watching Dilip Kumar, Dev Anand, and Raj Kapoor. He introduced me to Godard

and Fellini. He induced lateral thinking in us, made us see beyond the usual in both cinema and life," says Ghai.

For Mirza, the biggest takeaway was the attitude towards films: "He made us see them as sacred. That we had our name attached to our film and could therefore not let it down. He made us conscious of being respectful towards our work."

On his birth centenary, Ritwik Ghatak's rich legacy includes directing films that challenged the status quo, writing memorable stories, and teaching generations of filmmakers

One of the leading names behind the Indian People's Theatre Association, for Ghatak, all forms of arts were about fostering dissent as a means to channeling change. His work is celebrated most for portraying the pain of Bengal's partition through a singular sense of melodrama.

Meghe Dhaka Tara (Cloud-capped Star, 1960), *Komal Gandhar* (E Flat, 1961) and *Subarnarekha* (The Golden

Thread, 1965) formed the trilogy that not only documented a tumultuous moment in the nation's recent history, but its aftereffects on the lives of refugees—like his own family—from the erstwhile East Pakistan.

For filmmaker-designer-author Joy Bimal Roy, Ghatak was 'Bhoba Baba' who wrote his father Bimal Roy's *Madhumati* (1958) after having worked with him at New Theatres in Kolkata. "Our families had known each other from their days in Dhaka," says Roy. He remembers meeting Ghatak the first time when he landed unannounced in the early 1970s at the Godiwala Bungalow, their home in Bandra, Mumbai. Soon, Ghatak, looking ragged and tipsy, came over again. He spoke about how he had not been able to make a film in years, but was planning to write a script. Roy's mother promptly invited him to stay with them while he worked. It was her censure of his drinking that eventually made him turn a corner, even if for a little while, to complete the script of *Jukti Takko Aar Goppo*.

The film went on to win the national award for best story in 1974. It also proved to be Ghatak's last, one which could get released only posthumously in 1977—a couple of weeks after his first, *Nagarik* (The Citizen), saw the light of the day 25 years after it was made.

QUOTE CORNER

What's important is not only that he ran a brilliant campaign, it's what he talked about. He made clear what is true in every state in this country—that the richest people in America are becoming phenomenally richer. Billionaires are exploding in terms of wealth, while 60 percent of the people live paycheck to paycheck.

Bernie Sanders, US senator, on Zohran Mamdani's win in New York



This is the 1983 moment for us. I want to congratulate Richa (Ghosh) and Shafali (Varma) because they won the U19 World Cup and now the senior one.

Diana Edulji, former captain of Team India, on Women's World Cup win

When files and piles are getting awards, we know what it is. Such a jury and national government don't deserve Mammootty.

Prakash Raj, actor and former chair of the Kerala State Film Awards jury, on snub to the actor at the recent National Film Awards



Hasina's admission

Ref: *Sheikh Hasina keen on fighting polls* (Nov 8). Hasina's admission that she takes the leadership responsibility for the killing of 1,400 people during the anti-government protests in Bangladesh is shocking and, at the same time, a classic testimony to state terrorism. Hers is a colossal leadership failure. In today's strife-torn world, leaders like her should learn moderation.

Geetha B K, Kannur

Another Seshan

Ref: *The man who reshaped elections* (Nov 8). K F Wilfred's article is a very touching read about the determination of T N Seshan, who was a real tiger while facing politicians. Due to innumerable losses during the corona virus pandemic, we remember some events as 'before Covid' or 'after Covid'. Likewise for Seshan's period at the Election Commission, an institution that's now 'unindependent'. The

virus of wayward politicians affects the entire nation. We the people pray for another Seshan.

Indira Getzy David, Tirunelveli

Digital sovereignty

Ref: *Build Indian apps to reduce reliance on foreign tech* (Nov 8). India's digital deficiency in terms of foundational software, cloud services, and chip manufacture compared to China, South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan has made it heavily dependent on the US. Uncle Sam could let us down at any moment, given the mercurial tendencies of Trump. There is an absolute need to encourage our own digipreneurs like Sridhar Vembu, who has started thinking in terms of digital sovereignty.

G Nataraja Perumal, Elathur

Swadeshi platforms

India's heavy dependence on American technology is a growing concern. To strengthen digital self-reliance, the country needs its brightest minds—especially students from IITs and other top institutes—to develop innovative platforms, including social

media and communication apps. With the right vision and support, India can turn this challenge into an opportunity for true tech independence.

K Sakunthala, Coimbatore

Bihari rhetoric

Ref: *NDA's austerity model is anti-people: Tejashwi Yadav* (Nov 4). Sailing complacent on the boat of largely caste-based politics, Tejashwi Yadav seems to have specialised in abstract generalisations. Just to match his opponents, he's offered impractical freebies while remaining blissfully ignorant of the intricacies of financial management of an underdeveloped state like Bihar. In all likelihood, he will do to Bihar what he has done to the RJD pocketborough Raghapur during the last 10 years. Biharis are still destined only to be entertained the rhetoric of wild promises, without any pragmatic vision.

Ravi K Sinha, Patna

Probe allegations

Ref: *On eve of Bihar polls, Rahul Gandhi drops 'H files'* (Nov 5). The recent allegation by Rahul Gandhi

of "vote chori" is a matter of grave concern and must not be dismissed as mere political rhetoric. The Election Commission should take this allegation seriously and conduct a transparent, time-bound inquiry. The report must be released to the public to ensure accountability and restore faith in the system. If the claim is unfounded, it will protect the credibility of the machinery; if there is substance, corrective measures must follow.

T Kailash Ditya, Hyderabad

Check mirror

Ref: *Telangana CM calls Rama Rao, Kishan Reddy 'bad brothers'* (Nov 8). Revanth Reddy's rants on the eve of his birthday—be it against the private colleges who reimbursements are being unduly delayed by his government, or against his "bad brother" G Kishan Reddy, or against the Union government—are raucous, narcissistic, and hypocritical. He is not ready to admit the multiple aspects of maladministration of his own government. Finally, only facts and figures will speak.

U Atreya Sarma, Hyderabad

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DECCAN Chronicle

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Krishna Shastri
Devulapalli
Off the beaten track

Could satire ever be pro-establishment?

Of late, not that there has ever been a lull in the last eleven years, if my social media feed is anything to go by, there has been a noticeable uptick on the jokes/memes on a certain leader from the opposition. The pro-establishment 'funnyman', and there are many on social media — all followers of the powers that be either overtly or covertly — creating 'hilarious' memes, cartoons and reels is a curiosity, and makes for an interesting character study.

In essence, this guy gets his 'laughs' from mocking the underdog, the downtrodden, the little guy who has the temerity to raise his voice against The Order. (That this opposition leader isn't exactly your textbook 'little guy' may be true, but that he's definitely not the 'Big Guy' today and hasn't ever been in the past is incontrovertible.) This kind of satirist is successful. Sometimes his following outnumbers those of the conventional satirist. He is followed by powerful people. Quite often, the most powerful people in the country, in fact. After all, they constitute The Order.

When you attempt comedy/satire, it's all about two things —

1. who the target of your mockery is
2. and how strongly rooted in truth the cartoon/article/stand-up routine is

For a satirist the target is always the Establishment. The satirist's *raison d'être* is fighting the Establishment.

So, who, then, is the comedian fighting *for* the Establishment?

Why not refer to our glorious past — real or otherwise — that infallible ready reckoner for everything today. Can you imagine our homegrown satirists Tenali Rama, Birbal or Gopal Bhand siding with the king? These characters existed for the sole purpose of making the megalomaniac king see the error of his ways. How terribly unfunny our folklore would be if our jesters mocked the peasant — or even the breakaway rebel leader hiding in the forest — and propped up the king.

The comedian fighting for the Establishment, let's see, is like the guy who lovingly fashions artificial claws and then proceeds to present them to a pack of hyenas hunting a lone deer.

Coming to Requirement Number 2 — Truth — the Establishment (whoever they may be) is, first and last, its primary subverter. Truth, you see, is ugly. It is a powerful solvent that can dilute the bum-glue so essential to clinging on to shaky thrones.

This doesn't mean, conversely, that what *isn't* the Establishment is faithfully wedded to the truth.

It just means that the Establishment, especially the kind we see today all over the world, has much more, infinitely more, to lose than everyone else put together were Truth excavated.

For the satirist, Truth is all he has. That's his raw material, his paint, his ink. And his skill lies in diddling it out of uncomfortable, hard-to-reach spaces, spaces controlled by power, and making a cartoon, limerick, poster or film with it. So, to be a satirist, you can be on no side but the opposite.

Does that mean, then, that one can't send up the opposition, the second-rung guys who are dying to become the Establishment? Of course not. It just means that you cannot be seen as shooting the gun from the Establishment's shoulder.

How does the pro-establishment satirist get his laughs, then? Or his popularity?

Well, the pro-establishment 'humourist' gets his 'laughs' from the heckler/bully. The heckler doesn't laugh from his belly, spontaneously, his mirth bursting out as a response to the truth in the joke. His laughter doesn't come out of empathy. The heckler's laugh, nay, sneer, comes from the opposite place. He is the same guy who'll find a video of a firecracker tied to a stray pup's tail funny.

Have you noticed how his thigh-slapping, demented, off-key cackle is always part of a chorus? It is never a brave, hearty, honest, individual laugh. That is because the heckler/bully has neither the self-esteem nor the individuality to function alone.

Heckler/bullies love groups. They operate in gangs. Heckler/bullies can't take a joke on themselves. Their response to debate is violence. Their response to dissent is also violence. Above all, their response to mockery is violence.

Pro-establishment humour, therefore, is not humour. It is propaganda. A pro-establishment artist is not an artist. He is a painter of hoardings, a maker of cut-outs.

Pro-establishment art is a signed confession that the artist's muse is dead and its corpse is rotting in his basement.

Pro-establishment art is an open admission of fear. Fear of irrelevance, fear of being excluded.

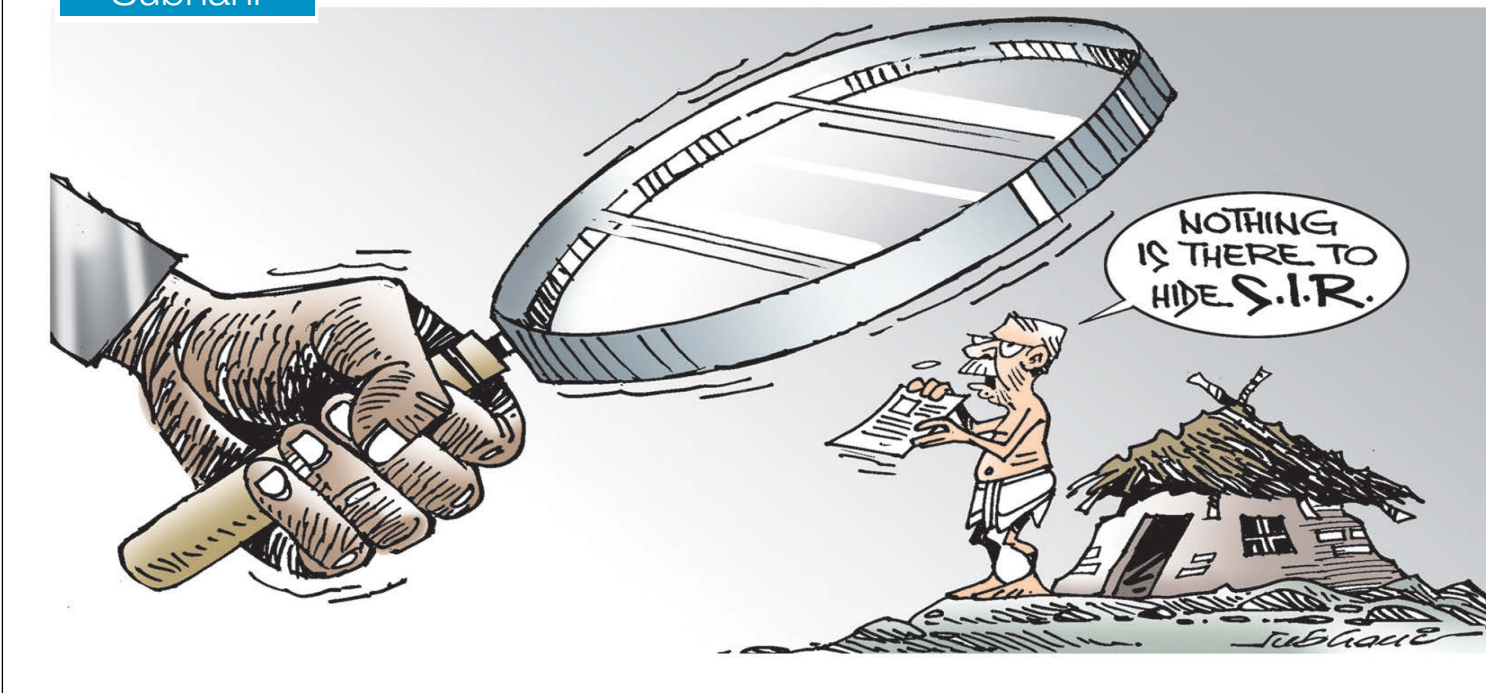
Pro-establishment art does the opposite of what art ought to do. It comforts the bully and disturbs the oppressed.

Pro-establishment art is temporarily profitable, gives the artist a sense of belonging, and makes him feel safe.

Till the Establishment realizes, as it always does, that he, too, doesn't make the cut for some reason, and comes in search of his compromised, obsequious and, above all, unfunny cojones.

Krishna Shastri Devulapalli is a novelist, columnist, playwright and screenwriter

Subhani



Only voters can purge Indian politics of crime



Pavan K. Varma
Chanakya's View

We may be the world's largest democracy, but we also have the highest number of criminals in politics. This deplorable truth stares us in the face, but we seem helpless to do anything about it. Ironically, the truth has been acknowledged; the government has set up committees, like that chaired by N.N. Vohra, which clearly spell out the magnitude of the problem and what should be done to erase or reduce it. But to no avail.

The reason for this union of muscle and mandate is not a coincidence but a system. What is this system based upon? Firstly, in the absence of fully functioning institutions, the criminal with muscle, money and influence seeks political legitimacy both as protection and a means of expanding his nefarious empire. Secondly, political parties, faced with fierce contests and enormous campaign costs, have little hesitation in picking candidates who are not "clean" but "winning". Winnability always trumps ethics. Third, voters and society at large often tolerate, even reward, the local strongman because of failures of governance.

A man who controls the local police, the legal system, development contracts, exerts patronage, collects rents and does out benefits — however unfairly — can seem more effective than an honest representative. Thus, the *dabang* politician, is not simply a villain: he fulfils a role in a system starved of other alternatives as a modern form of Robin Hood. Fourthly, legal and institutional facilitating factors — slow courts, weak prosecution, lenient bail, political influence on

police, diffuse accountability — all help this nexus persist. In short, it is the system which enables criminality in politics.

Examples of *bahubalis* are ubiquitous. In Bihar, which is in the throes of the Assembly elections, people like Anant Singh, who is a JD(U) candidate from Mokama constituency, has just been arrested for alleged murder. He is a history sheet of repute, yet the JD(U) gave him a ticket. His rival is the wife of Surajbhan Singh, who is in jail for life for murder. The only candidate thus far for whom the ailing Lalu Yadav came out to campaign is well-known *dabang*, Rital Yadav. Other well-known criminals in politics include Munna Shukla, Pradeep Mahto and Anand Mohan. The last had the audacity to kill an IAS officer, Gopalganj district magistrate G. Krishnaiah. In neighbouring UP, gangster Mukhtar Ansari, elected multiple times as MLA, faced dozens of heinous criminal charges. According to the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR), about 40 per cent of sitting MPs have declared criminal cases against them, of which 25 per cent are for serious offences like murder, kidnapping and crimes against women. In a sample of 23 MPs re-elected between 2004-19, 12 declared criminal cases, nine had serious charges. These examples and figures reveal the pattern: the candidate with a criminal record does not remain marginal but is elected, re-elected, trusted with office, sometimes even ministers. The marriage of *muzahimat* (muscle) and mandate becomes normalised. The criminal finds sanctuary in the white kurta; the politician wields a revolver beneath the bal-

The candidacy barrier must be higher. There is also the need for campaign finance transparency. One reason criminals gain attraction is they bring large undeclared resources.

lot box. And the shocking part is the sheer brazenness with which this malaise continues, as if the law is meant only for the weak.

What can be done to remove this blot from our democracy? The law must ensure that any candidate with a serious criminal case (once charges are framed) is disqualified from contesting elections. Speedy trials and convictions are needed, but in the interim the candidacy barrier must be higher. Political parties must refuse to nominate those with serious charges. A system of internal ethics plus public naming of such candidates might shame the system. There is also the need for campaign finance transparency and limits. One reason criminals gain attraction is that they bring large undeclared resources.

Additionally, independent prosecution and fast-track courts for political crime are essential. Civil society and media must also demand accountability. The electorate must understand that muscle men may deliver short-term patronage but will undermine both rule of law and development. Grassroots voter awareness asking for clean candidates matters. Finally, because criminalisation of politics feeds on social inequality, caste mobilisation, poverty and weak institutions, only inclusive development and credible governance can diminish the lure of muscle-politics.

Until the above happens, criminals will find sanctuary in the white kurta, and the politician will wield a revolver beneath the ballot box. It is a vicious cycle: parties choose these candi-

dates; voters elect them; law enforcers let them roam freely; society tolerates them. Electoral arithmetic legitimises extortion, illicit funding, smuggling, land grabbing and mining mafias. India, for all its democratic credentials and Constitutional promise, is hampered by the fact that too many of its corridors of power are haunted not only by ambition but by the shadow of the gangster, the rent-seeker, the muscle-politician. The vote has become a currency traded not merely on ideas but on intimidation, money, deferred justice and brokerage. The spectacle of the criminal costume changing into the politician's garb should raise not just alarm but a national introspection.

Unless we accept that the poll booth is where the rot starts, the courtroom where it can be checked, and the public square where it must be named, we will continue to kneel before a democracy that in form is vibrant but in spirit is compromised. The real India must not be the one where the armed go to parliament, but where the accountable are marginalised; not one where muscle supplants mandate, but where mandate itself regains its moral heft. To be Indian is to aspire not only to be governed, but to govern oneself, to demand of one's society higher ideals than mere survival of the fittest — and in so doing, to make corruption of politics an exception, not the expectation.

Politicians will not change; criminals will not change; only when voters say no to *bahubalis*, will the system change. It is voters who can ensure a more ethical democracy, and must resolutely say: Enough is enough. The country is awaiting this revolution. The ideal of the *rajarishi* — king sage — not might is right — must be the guiding beacon of the world's largest democracy.

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

LETTERS DANGEROUS DOGS

There is a great amount of criticism about the behavior of some dog lovers, particularly their perceived intensity or "narcissistic traits" when their love for their pets is challenged. They howl until it stops. The court has consciously directed the non-release of such stray dogs to the same location from which they were picked up, as permitting the same would frustrate the very effect of the directions issued to liberate such institutional areas from the presence of stray dogs. The matter will be taken up again on January 13, 2026.

Arati Abhishek
Chennai

WELCOME MOVE

With the ever-increasing popularity of women's cricket, the ICC has come out with an announcement that the next edition of Women's ODI World Cup in 2029, will feature 10 teams, expanding it from the present 8 teams. This is a welcome move by the ICC, as during the just concluded World Cup, we sorely missed one of the best teams - West Indies, who richly deserved to play the World Cup. Who knows, we may see teams from the U.S.A and Afghanistan too during the 2029 World Cup.

Janaki Mahadevan
Chennai

OUTSTANDING SCIENTIST

James Watson, the co-discoverer of the structure and function of deoxyribonucleic acid or DNA, passed away on November 6 at the ripe old age of 97, leaving a 'fraught legacy'. He shared with Francis Crick and Maurice Wilkins the Nobel Prize for Physiology or Medicine in 1962 for their work on DNA. The discovery of the 'twisted ladder-like double-helix structure of DNA', the genetic blueprint for life, was a significant breakthrough in molecular biology. His tell-all memoir "The Double Helix" was rated as a classic of the literature of science. Like Charles Darwin's "On the Origin of Species" and Richard Dawkins' "The Selfish Gene", it became a best-seller and broadened our understanding of biology. The double helix has a profound impact on science and society. Watson used the phrase "explosive impact" to describe it. Its image has become an emblem of the life sciences. Nevertheless, his eccentricities like auctioning off his Nobel Prize medal and his regressive, long debunked and discarded views pale into insignificance in comparison with his seminal work in unravelling "the secret of life".

G. David Milton
Maruthancode

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Anita Katyal
Political Gup-Shup



Elusive Allavaru irks Congmen; is Raghav Chadha set to leave AAP?

The first phase of Bihar elections is over and campaigning for the next one is now underway but the rumblings in the Congress camp refuse to die down. While Rahul Gandhi's absence during the contentious seat-sharing negotiations still rankles with the Congress leaders, Krishna Allavaru, the party's Bihar in charge, has been giving them the most grief. Not only is Mr Allavaru blamed for the faulty selection of candidates, he has further invited the wrath of the cadre for his inaccessibility. Since he has proved to be elusive, the state unit representatives who wished to meet Mr Allavaru regarding poll strategy and other campaign issues, devised a smart strategy to corner him once they learned that the Bihar in-charge enjoyed a leisurely breakfast every morning at a Patna five-star hotel. Suddenly, the hotel management found that their restaurant serving breakfast was teeming with Congress leaders who would arrive at 8.45 am, knowing that Mr Allavaru would be down by 9.15 am. Some of them hovered around his table while others

even went as far as to spend their own money on breakfast just so they could join tables with Mr Allavaru to get his undivided attention. Not sure if this strategy paid off.

A few days before polling day, former IAS officer and Union power minister R.K. Singh sought to put the Bihar government in a spot, alleging that a massive Rs 62,000 crore scam has been detected in the state's power sector. According to him, the public exchequer had suffered huge financial losses as a private company was allowed to charge inflated rates. These charges would normally stir a storm and create panic in the ruling alliance but the BJP leadership is most unconcerned about them. The Bharatiya Janata Party and its allies are going ahead with their campaign, convinced that these allegations will not impact their electoral prospects as their well-oiled machinery will see them through. Not only have the party cadres been keeping a punishing schedule, the BJP is also said to have enlisted the help of several other

groups, including 300-odd astrologers who are doing the rounds to set the narrative in favour of the BJP-Janata Dal (United) alliance.

It appears that Rajya Sabha member Milind Deora forgot that he is now with the BJP when he posted on X about the enthusiastic response in India to Zohran Mamdani's election as the next mayor of New York City. "It's that season again, when India's self-proclaimed urban intelligentsia will obsess over Zohran Mamdani's New York mayoral win, yet have no clue who their own city's mayor is," Mr Deora remarked. He was promptly told on X that the question he should be asking is how long ago did Mumbai have a mayor. Mr Deora clearly overlooked the fact that his newly-adopted party, the BJP, is in power but it has not called for corporation elections in Mumbai for the past three years on some pretext or the other. The state government has to necessarily schedule the municipal and other local body elections in Mumbai and Maharashtra after the Supreme Court ordered that this

process be completed by end-January next year.

That the once visible and vocal Aam Aadmi Party's Rajya Sabha MP Raghav Chadha is out of favour is no secret. He is no longer seen or heard, fueling speculation that he is exploring other options, which does not exclude the BJP. There is a serious trust deficit between him and AAP leader Arvind Kejriwal which first manifested itself when Mr Chadha was stripped of his charge of Punjab. The break is now complete as the office he occupied at Delhi's Punjab Bhavan has been closed and his staff withdrawn. Similarly, Mr Chadha no longer has the use of a room allotted to him at Delhi's Kapurthala House, the security provided to him by the Punjab government has been pulled out while the house where Mr Chadha stayed when in Chandigarh is also closed for him. AAP insiders maintain Mr Chadha is biding his time and is keeping a low profile till he makes his next move. According to the political grapevine, movie star Priyanka

Chopra, also Mr Chadha's wife's cousin, is helping him since she has strong BJP connections. The AAP is hoping Mr Chadha will leave on his own for it stands to lose a Rajya Sabha seat if it expels him.

Delhi chief minister Rekha Gupta is fast acquiring the reputation as a photo-op CM. There is not a day when she is not snapped participating in a puja, patting slum children, listening to the problems of women working in the informal sector or inaugurating some government programme or the other. BJP insiders maintain the reality is that the functioning of the Delhi government is monitored and supervised directly by the Prime Minister's Office while the RSS has deputed its nominees to the chief minister's office.

And yet there is no discernible action on fixing the Capital's broken infrastructure, improving waste management or managing the city's pollution levels.

Anita Katyal is a Delhi-based journalist

Democracy and Sanatana Dharma are essentially shared ideals

VANAM JWALA
NARASIMHA RAO

Within a span of eight days, on October 25, 30, and November 2, I had the divine privilege of meeting three extraordinary personalities in Hyderabad, the Chairperson of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) Justice V Ramasubramanian, His Holiness Jagadguru Sri Shankara Vijayendra Saraswathi Swami of Kanchi Kamakoti Peetham in the Skanda Giri Sri Subramanya Swami temple, and His Holiness Sri Sringeri Jagadguru Vidush-ekhara Bharathi Swami at the Veda Bhavan (Sankara Gurukul Veda Patashala), respectively. Each meeting left an indelible mark on my mind and heart, affirming that 'democracy and Sanatana Dharma' are shared ideals, when seen through the prism of righteousness.

During my meeting with Justice Ramasubramanian, I presented the 'Pre-Print Copy' of my 508-page book 'Democracy and Governance Through Lens and Blurred Glasses: A Journey into Distorted Visions of Modern-Day Politics.'

The former High Court and Supreme Court judge, a walking encyclopedia of contemporary jurisprudence and timeless dharmic wisdom, brings to public life a rare combination of legal wisdom and eternal Sanatana Dharma.

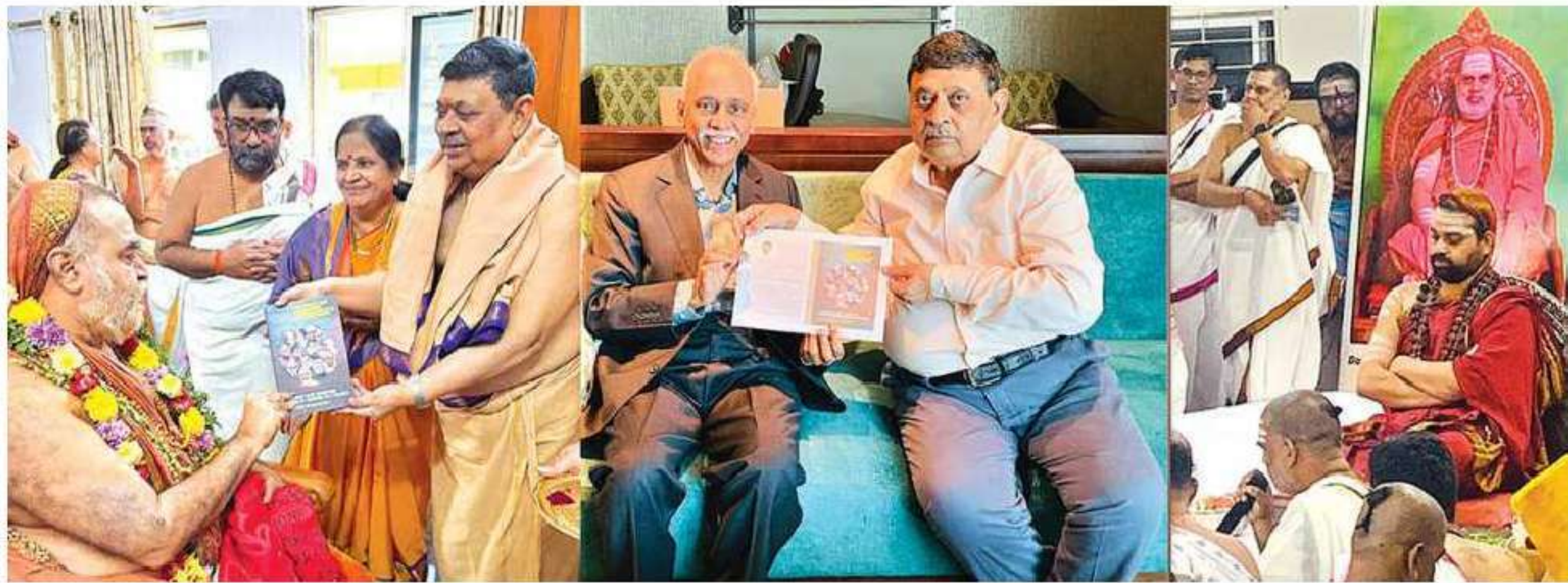
In his graciously written appraisal for my book, he called it a work of 'Universal

Appeal' that could serve as 'a guiding light to all those who are and who aspire to become part of the three pillars of democracy.'

He effortlessly connected aspects of 'constitutional principles with the ethical undercurrents of Sanatana Dharma.' For him, democracy is not a mere institutional construct but a living embodiment of Sanatana Dharma in motion, constantly evolving, self-correcting, and inclusive.

Then, I had the opportunity to meet Sri Shankara Vijayendra Saraswathi Swami, the 70th Peetadhipathi of the Kanchi Kamakoti Peetham, accompanied by my wife Vijayalakshmi. The time we spent in his luminous presence remains one of the most cherished moments of our lives. Presenting my book to Swamiji I felt like offering a garland of thoughts at the altar of wisdom. His gentle smile, his calm radiance, and his attentive grace filled me with a sense of completeness. He appreciated my work and especially mentioned that Justice Ramasubramanian's appraisal gave it a special spiritual dimension, a convergence of the sacred and the civic.

When I spoke about my ongoing effort to write a simplified English rendition of the Valmiki Ramayana, through contextualized essays connecting the epic's eternal lessons to contemporary life, the Swamiji expressed visible joy. He blessed the endeavour and remarked that such a work



Back home, in a quiet reflection, I sensed the thread that linked all three encounters, the jurist and the two Jagadgurus. Each, in their own way, reaffirmed that the endurance of democracy is sustained not by systems alone but by values, not by legislation alone but by moral illumination.

would greatly benefit Non-Resident Indians and their children, helping them rediscover their roots through accessible wisdom.

What moved me most, however, was his spontaneous directive that I take up the monumental task of writing a comprehensive history of the Kanchi Kamakoti Peetham. It was not merely an instruction; it was a sacred trust. I accepted the divine command, realizing that this is not just another literary task, but a spiritual duty.

Looking back, that morning was not a meeting, but

a moment of divine convergence, a sacred intersection of thought and faith. It was as if reason and reverence embraced each other, knowledge found harmony with compassion, and academic inquiry bowed before eternal wisdom. The book I offered to Swamiji represented my quest for truth in the turbulent and complex arena of 'democracy and governance.' That day, Jnana and Bhakti merged, and in that union, I found the bridge that connects democracy with Sanatana Dharma.

Meanwhile, on November 2, another divine experi-

ence awaited me at the Veda Bhavan in Secunderabad. Founded by the late Venkatram Ghanapati, an erudite Vedic Scholar, and nurtured by his equally distinguished son, Sriram Ghanapati, the institution stands as a living sanctuary of Vedic learning, established under the blessings of the revered Paramacharya of the Kanchi Peetham.

The serene atmosphere, the rhythmic chanting of Vedas and the humble faces of young scholars filled the air with sanctity. My wife and I were blessed to have our visit coinciding with her birthday,

adding a personal glow to that spiritual evening.

We had the fortune of receiving the blessings of His Holiness Sri Sringeri Jagadguru Vidushekhara Bharathi Swami, the illustrious Pontiff of the Sringeri Sharada Peetham. When I presented my books, Swamiji gently smiled and said that he had already received the Telugu work 'Sajiva Vahini Sanatana Dharmam' from a disciple. His affectionate acknowledgment filled me with deep gratitude.

In his Anugraha Bhashanam, brief yet profound, the Swamiji spoke of the endur-

ing strength of the Vedic vision and the timeless responsibility to uphold righteousness (The Eternal Dharma). He fondly remembered Venkatram Ghanapati, whose dedication to Vedic learning continues to nurture the Gurukul's growth.

Addressing the Young Veda Pathasala students, he advised them that after mastering the Vedas, they should take up at least one more shastra for true knowledge arises when the depth of shruti combines with the insight of shastra.

When I left the Gurukul premises, I felt the quiet assurance that as long as such Gurukuls thrive and as long as spiritual teachers like the Sringeri and Kanchi Jagadgurus continue to guide, assisted by Ghanapatis and Salakshana Ghanapatis like Sriram and the late Venkatram, the light of Sanatana Dharma can never dim.

Back home, in a quiet reflection, I sensed the thread that linked all three encounters, the jurist and the two Jagadgurus. Each, in their own way, reaffirmed that the endurance of democracy is sustained not by systems alone but by values, not by legislation alone but by moral illumination.

Justice Ramasubramanian reminded that the spirit of law must rest upon ethics. Jagadguru Vijayendra Saraswathi Swami showed that knowledge must find its moral compass in spirituality. Jagadguru Vidushekhara Bharathi Swami reminded that learning must evolve into wisdom through disciplined

devotion.

Between these three, the worldly and the spiritual, the temporal and the eternal, lies the very essence of India's continuity. Democracy, at its finest, is not a departure from Sanatana Dharma but its modern expression. It draws life from the same fountain of truth, compassion, duty, and humility that Sanatana Dharma has preserved for millennia. If Sanatana Dharma is the soul of the great Indian civilization, then democracy is its true living body, animated, evolving, and self-correcting, yet inseparably rooted in ethical consciousness.

As I now look ahead, I look forward to an opportunity to present my book to commendable and concerned individuals and institutions, especially those who carry the 'commitment to preserve, protect, and promote the ethical essence of public life.'

For me, this journey is not about the success of a publication but about reaffirming a conviction that governance without goodness is hollow, and democracy without dharma is directionless.

The journey of democracy, like the journey of the soul, is one of gratitude, to those who guide, to those who question, and to those who believe.

Let me end where I began, with faith renewed and conviction strengthened to renew that 'democracy and Sanatana Dharma are essentially shared values' which is not merely a concept, but a truth to live by. Come what may, both shall endure eternally.

Here's why morning exercise feels so hard

HUNTER BENNETT

YOUR alarm goes off. Somehow you manage to get dressed, drag yourself to the gym, and start squatting. But why does it feel so hard? Your legs are heavy and the weight you lifted only a couple of days ago – in the afternoon – feels almost impossible. No, you're not imagining it.

There's a large body of evidence to suggest that most of us are stronger, more powerful, and have better endurance later in the day. There are several reasons because of which exercising can feel much harder first thing in the morning.

Here's why, and how you can adjust to morning exercise if you need to.

The circadian rhythm affects workouts:

Your body has a natural 24-hour clock that regulates hormones, body temperature and when you feel most awake or ready for sleep. This clock is called your circadian rhythm. It is controlled by the brain but can also be influenced by external factors such as sunlight. This might explain why exercising in the morning in winter can be especially hard for some of us. Research shows your circadian rhythm is clearly linked to exercise performance, which tends to follow a daily pattern. Most people reach their peak between 4 and 7 pm. This means we tend to be stronger, faster and more powerful in the afternoon and early evening. We don't know exactly why. But there are a few potential explanations.

Body temperature:

Your core body temperature is at its lowest around 5am, and steadily increases across the day. When your body temperature rises, your muscles contract more efficiently.

Hormonal fluctuations:

Insulin – the hormone that regulates blood sugar (glucose) levels – tends to be highest in the morning. This

leads to a decrease in blood sugar, meaning less glucose your body can use as fuel, likely affecting how hard you can push.

Nervous system functioning:

While we don't know exactly why, there is some evidence to suggest your nervous system is better at sending signals to your muscles throughout the day. This allows you to use more of your muscle fibres during exercise, essentially making you stronger.

What if I'm a morning person?

Your sleep chronotype can also affect exercise performance. This describes your natural inclination for sleep and wakefulness at certain parts of the day. Research shows that night owls with a late chronotype do notably worse when exercising in the morning, compared to people with an early chronotype. Interestingly, being sleep deprived seems to affect physical performance in the afternoon more than in the morning.

Does timing matter?

Whatever time of the day, if you can feel yourself working you will make progress – for example, increasing muscle strength and improving aerobic fitness and heart health. So, if you're exercising to get bigger, stronger and fitter, the timing doesn't matter. Besides, it often comes down to motivation and convenience. If you like to exercise

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earlier in the day and that suits you best, there's no reason to change the routine.

Adapt if needed:

If you have a sporting event coming up in the morning – and you usually train in the afternoon – you might want to prepare by doing some early exercise so you're at your peak. There is evidence to suggest that repeatedly training in the morning can close the gap between your afternoon and morning performance. Basically, your body can get used to exercising at a particular time, although it will likely take a few weeks to adapt. Finally, if you find exercising close to bedtime makes you feel too alert and is disrupting your sleep, you may want to try doing something gentler at night and/or exercising earlier in the day. Either way, it is fine.

(The writer is associated with the University of South Australia)

Reform and role: Telangana's structural dilemma in education policy

ADAMA SRINIVAS REDDY

WHEN the government of Telangana announced the constitution of the Telangana Education Commission (TEC) in September 2024, it was seen as a bold move to chart a new path for educational reform in the state.

The commission's mission to create a comprehensive roadmap from pre-primary to higher education promised both breadth and ambition.

As Telangana enters the implementation phase of its Education Policy (TEP), role overlaps, structural inconsistencies, and procedural lapses threaten to dilute the integrity of what was envisioned as a landmark reform.

A commission without sub-panels:

The TEC, headed by retired IAS officer Akunuri Murali, was constituted with only one Chairperson and three members, without any domain-specific subcommittees or research units.

This is in sharp contrast to national and state precedents: the Kothari Commission (1964-66) operated with 12 task forces and seven working groups, the Karnataka Education Commission (2023) created 30 theme-based task forces on school, higher, and technical education and Tamil Nadu's Education Policy Committee (2022) established a 12-member high-level panel.

In Telangana's case, the limited membership has restricted its capacity to deliver a comprehensive and cross-sectoral analysis. A commission without subcommittees risks functioning as a high-level advisory circle rather than a policy-generating institution.

The TEC has so far released only a series of thematic papers, on mid-day meals, private school fee regulation, and teacher education, rather than a consolidated policy framework.

Parallel processes, not sequential reform:

Even before the TEC's comprehensive report could be completed, the School Education Department constituted 11 Focus Groups last month under the Telangana Education Policy (TEP) initiative. Each focus group, ranging from teacher education to digital learning and joyful classrooms was assigned a convener, co-convener, four members, and several partnering NGOs. However, the government's memo (No.3338/TEP/SCERT/TG/2025) does not reference the commission's ongoing work, nor does it specify a timeline or integration mechanism between the TEC and TEP initiatives. This reflects a break in the policy chain. The policy sequence has inverted. The report should feed the focus groups, not the other way around. The result is two parallel processes instead of one continuum.

Chairman as convener-A question of hierarchy:

Adding to the confusion, the State Government also appointed TEC Chairman Akunuri Murali as convener of the focus group on 'Infrastructure and Joyous Learning Environment'.

While this move might reflect the state's desire to leverage his expertise, policy observers opine that it blurs institutional boundaries and dilutes the autonomy of the commission itself.

When advisory autonomy merges into execution, the oversight collapses into self-reference, the checker becomes the doer. By contrast, both Karnataka and Tamil Nadu maintained strict separation between commission leadership and operational groups.

In Telangana, however, the commission's chair now functions as a departmental convener, potentially reducing his oversight role over other domains.



When advisory autonomy merges into execution, the oversight collapses into self-reference, the checker becomes the doer. By contrast, both Karnataka and Tamil Nadu maintained strict separation between commission leadership and operational groups. In Telangana, however, the commission's chair now functions as a departmental convener, potentially reducing his oversight role over other domains.

Governance gaps and institutional blurring:

Experts suggest that TEC's structural limitations and overlapping assignments signal procedural weakness rather than intent failure. While there is no legal impropriety, the design lacks the institutional layering required for robust reform.

A UNESCO (2023) policy brief on "Designing Education Commissions for Reform Impact" states that: "Effective commissions require inclusive membership, thematic division of labour, and autonomy from implementing agencies. Role compression undermines their strategic mandate." Telangana's current model, where the commission, department, and the SCERT-led PMU operate in parallel silos, risks producing fragmented recommendations rather than a cohesive state education policy.

What other States did right:

In examining how different states have approached education reform, we find that unlike Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, which treated their commissions as foundational to reform, Telangana's focus groups have proceeded without waiting for the TEC's comprehensive report, highlighting a critical gap in sequencing and structural coherence.

The path forward-Coherence over speed:

Telangana's education reform journey reflects the state's developmental ambition—forward-looking, consultative, and energetic.

Yet, as the OECD (2022) cautions, "Policy acceleration without institutional coherence can produce impressive activity but limited accountability." This tension is increasingly

evident in the implementation phase of the Telangana Education Policy (TEP), where structural inconsistencies, role overlaps, and procedural lapses risk diluting the integrity of what was envisioned as a landmark reform. As one analyst aptly notes, "Telangana's ambition is laudable, but its framework must reflect its scope."

To recalibrate the TEP process and safeguard its transformative potential, policy specialists and education governance experts propose a three-pronged corrective approach. First, institutional integration is essential: the TEP Focus Groups must be formally aligned with TEC recommendations, and the commission should be granted supervisory review authority to ensure coherence and accountability. Second, structural strengthening is advised through the reconstitution of the TEC, with dedicated subcommittees focusing on higher education, teacher training, and governance reform. Third, transparency must be prioritised by publishing a "Green paper on education reform in Telangana," inviting feedback from academics, teachers, and civil society before the policy is finalised.

To fulfill its founding vision, the TEC must remain the compass—not a cart in the caravan it was meant to guide.

(The Hanumakonda-based writer is the General Secretary of Society for Change In Education, Telangana)

Opinion

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 9, 2025



When pros play with amateurs

FAIRWAY FILES
Rahil Gangjee

IF YOU'VE EVER been part of a pro-am or even just tagged along for a Saturday morning fourball, you know this truth: the gap between professional golf and amateur golf is not measured in yards — it's measured in logic. The pros are grinding on TrackMan numbers, launch angles and wedge gapping. The amateurs? They're mostly trying to remember where they last kept their glove. Yet, put the two together and you have one of the most entertaining spectacles in golf — part sport, part comedy show, and entirely unforgettable.

I didn't tee it up at the pro-am in the recent DPWorld India Championship, but I've played enough of them to know that every group comes with the same ingredients: one guy who swears he *used to* be a single-digit handicapper, one who's borrowed every club in his bag, one who thinks "draw" means an art competition, and one who will constantly say, "I haven't played in a long time." That last line, by the way, is the national anthem of the 18-handicapper.

"I haven't played in a long time" — the classic disclaimer

This is the go-to line before *every* first tee shot. It's the golfer's version of "no warm-up, yaar." It serves as a built-in excuse for any chaos that follows.

But here's the magic — the moment they stripe one down the middle, you'll see a transformation worthy of a reality show reveal. Suddenly, they stand taller, twirl the club like Rory, and casually say, "Guess the muscle memory's still there."

If the next shot finds the trees, don't worry — it's because they "overswung trying to get back into tournament mode."

Tournament focus vs weekend chaos

A pro's pre-round routine is almost surgical — yardages, wind reads, tempo, hydration. An amateur's pre-round routine is usually a frantic search for tees, followed by a quick check if the clubhouse serves idlis before 9 am. We warm up by stretching our shoulders; they warm up by telling stories. I once overheard an amateur telling his partner on the first tee, "Bro, I shot 82 last week at KGA." His friend replied, "Front nine or total?" By the fourth hole, both were still discussing that mythical 82 while their balls explored opposite fairways.

Conversations that derail your swing thoughts

In a tournament, my inner monologue sounds like this: "*Wind off the left, 152 yards, smooth eight iron.*" In a pro-am, it sounds like: "Rahil, is Tiger really that strong in person?" "Do you think LIV players use the same balls?" "Bro, you must've met Neeraj Chopra, right?" It's impossible to visualise a shot when your playing partner is live-streaming your pre-shot routine to his WhatsApp group titled '*Golf Addicts Forever*'. Once, a partner asked if I could shout "FORE!" in slow motion for his reel. I said, "Buddy, in my world, if I'm yelling FORE, we're not doing retakes."

Golf meets boardroom

Many of the amateurs you meet in pro-ams are top executives. They can negotiate mergers worth hundreds of crores but struggle to merge clubface with golf ball. It's fascinating to watch their mental processes. One gentleman once told me, "I visualise every deal before I make it. I'll apply the same to this chip." He closed his eyes for five seconds, visualised deeply — then chunked it two feet. To his credit, he smiled and said, "Well, the idea was solid." Golf, my friends, is the greatest equaliser. It humbles the powerful, confuses the confident, and occasionally rewards the clueless.

ACROSS THE AISLE
P Chidambaram

The embrace between Mr Trump and Mr Xi has left India in the cold, along with Japan, Australia and Taiwan. India is practically friendless in South Asia. West Asian countries are forging new arrangements among themselves and with Israel, without India. It is time to acquire some humility and go back to the policy drawing board

THE MOST CONSEQUENTIAL leaders of the world today are Mr Donald Trump and Mr Xi Jinping. Others are Mr Vladimir Putin and Mr Benjamin Netanyahu. For good or bad, their words and actions have an impact beyond the borders of the countries of which they are Heads of Government/ State. Mr Narendra Modi would like to be among them — his party claims that he is already one of them — but the reality *is* different.

Economic realities

India's economy is puny (in terms of size) compared to America's or China's. In comparison with Russia and Israel, in terms of per capita income, India's is tiny. Here is the data (*see table*):

America's economy is 7 times larger and China's is 4.5 times larger than India's. India may be the fastest growing large economy but even doubling the GDP will take 10 years from now. In the meanwhile, even at a smaller growth rate (but on a larger base), the GDP of US and of China would become bigger and the absolute *gap* in GDP between India and US and between India and China may grow wider. Russia and Israel may have a smaller GDP but they are richer and their *per capita* income is 6 times and 18 times, respectively, greater than India's. The math is known to every leader of the world, except India's current rulers!

The G-2 surprise

The world respects India because it is the most populous country, and for its democracy, history, ancient culture, role as a peace-maker, market size and potential — not because India is a superpower. The countries of the world have a stake in trade and regional peace. Hence, they will engage with both India and Pakistan notwithstanding India's position that "if you are India's friend, you have to be hostile to Pakistan".

Besides, the world is changing rapidly. In 2023, India trumpeted that it was the host of the G-20 Summit. The G-20 meeting and Leaders' Summit are an annual event and



File photo of US President Donald Trump with China's President Xi Jinping

Trump embraces Xi, Modi in the cold

Country	Size of GDP (in \$ trillion)	Per capita income*
USA	30.51	89,000
China	19.23	13,800
Russia	2.54	17,500
Israel	0.6	54,000
India	4.19	2,900

* in approximate nominal \$ in 2025

the host country is decided by rotation. Brazil was the host in 2024, South Africa will host the meeting/Summit in November 2025 and the US will be the host in 2026. Hosting the G-20 is no big deal; no other country makes a *hoo-ha* about it.

G-8 and G-7 are more significant than G-20. Now, we have something new — G-2. Before and after his meeting with Mr Xi, Mr Trump elevated Mr Xi to the status of an equal, something which he will never do to Mr Modi. Mr Trump was effusive, Mr Xi, as usual, enigmatic. Whatever India may say about a multi-polar world, there are only two superpowers in the world, with Russia closely behind. Yesterday's "existential threat to US security" has mysteriously vanished. With the new *bonhomie*, QUAD will fall by the wayside.

Do a reality check: The US has concluded a mini-trade agreement with China on rare earths and

soyabean, and the two countries are likely to resolve the Tik-Tok issue. The US-India trade agreement has been negotiated through 2025 but there is no conclusion yet.

There was a tariff war between the US and China (each imposing retaliatory tariffs on the other) but, after the meeting at Busan, the leaders have apparently agreed to a truce on matters including technology transfers, export controls and port fees, and both countries will ease the tariffs mutually. The US has made no move to ease the punitive tariffs on India. US sanctions on Chinese firms remain; so will sanctions on Indian companies if they buy Russian oil.

America has curtailed preferential access to China's goods; equally, the revocation in 2019 of Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) that India enjoyed seems final.

In the cold

Mr Modi last met Mr Trump on February 14, 2025. Subsequently, there were three occasions when a Modi-Trump meeting could have taken place. First, after the G-7 Summit in Canada, Mr Trump invited Mr Modi to 'stop over' in Washington, but Mr Modi declined; I think rightly. Second, when Mr Modi did not travel to Egypt for the signing of the Gaza peace agreement. Third, the ASEAN Summit and Related Summits in Kuala Lumpur in October 2025 but, inexplicably, Mr Modi decided to address the gathering virtually; I think wrongly. It is widely believed that Mr Modi is keen to avoid a bilateral meeting or even a conversation with Mr Trump.

For the umpteenth time, Mr Trump has claimed that he had used the 'no trade' threat to compel India and Pakistan to stop the war, and the war *was* stopped on the fourth day. Mr Modi has not denied the claim publicly or in Parliament. Besides, Mr Modi has never told Mr Xi in his face that Chinese troops had intruded into Indian territory and they remain illegal occupiers.

The embrace between Mr Trump and Mr Xi has left India in the cold, along with Japan, Australia and Taiwan. India is practically friendless in South Asia. West Asian countries are forging new arrangements among themselves and with Israel, without India. It is time to acquire some humility and go back to the policy drawing board.



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FIFTH COLUMN
TAVLEEN SINGH

WHEN RAHUL GANDHI exploded his 'H bomb' last week, I happened to be aimlessly switching channels in search of news from Bihar. And, when he popped up on my TV screen striding up and down, one hand in pocket and the other clutching a microphone, on a stage whose backdrop was a screen with many voter ID cards, all with the same photo of a beautiful woman, I stopped switching channels. I listened carefully as he demanded to know from his audience of journalists if they knew who this woman was. With the panache of a skilled quizmaster, he demanded to know if anyone knew where she was from, how old she was and if she looked like a Haryanvi woman. When nobody spoke, he revealed dramatically that she was a Brazilian model who appeared to have voted in Haryana many times during last year's election.

This was certainly intriguing, so I continued to watch. The Leader of the Opposition expounded on his theory that the Haryana election would have been won by the Congress Party if the BJP had not cheated with help from the Election Commission. Rahul Gandhi's 'H bomb' was potent enough for TV reporters to scurry off the next day to the

Bihar betrayed again

villages where the Brazilian model had voted repeatedly. Sometimes as Sweety, sometimes as Pinky and sometimes as Saraswati. They found that in most cases it was a real Haryanvi woman who had voted with a real voter's ID card, but with the wrong photograph pasted on it. Nobody knew how the Brazilian model's picture appeared on their cards. She herself released a video saying she had never been to India. The Election Commission needs to explain.

It was when Rahul Gandhi said that the elections in Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and in other states had all been stolen, his 'H bomb' lost its potency. And, when Priyanka Gandhi repeated her brother's charges about '*vote chori*' at a rally in Bihar the next day, it began to sound as if the Congress Party was admitting that their coalition could lose. It is sad that our oldest political party, that was once so powerful that it ruled almost every state in India, should pin all their hopes in Bihar on this one issue of voter fraud.

There are other issues. The BJP's mightiest leaders have made some of the ugliest, dangerously rabid speeches during the Bihar campaign. In constituencies where Muslim voters dominate, they have spoken of how they plan to weed out illegal Bangladeshi immigrants and throw them out of India. Remember that the Home

Minister once called them termites. If the Congress Party had been true to its secular values, its senior leaders would have called the BJP out and shamed it for once more trying to incite Hindus against Muslims. And for once more trying to remind Muslims that as long as the BJP remains in power in Delhi, they need to get used to being second class citizens. The Prime Minister led the charge against the '*ghusptiyyas* (infiltrators)' and in doing so lowered the stature of his office. Why does the Congress Party say nothing?

There is much that the Election Commission needs to say as well. If the decision to extend the exercise it calls SIR (Special Intensive Revision) to other states is being viewed with suspicion, it is because there are valid questions that the Chief Election Commissioner must answer. In my ever-humble opinion, the most important of these questions is why is SIR being perceived as an exercise to exclude Muslims in general? Could it be because it is exactly that?

In response to Rahul Gandhi's 'H bomb', the Election Commission has pointed out that the reason why the electoral rolls need intensive revision is precisely because of the charges he has made. Does not ring true somehow. If the Chief Election Commissioner behaved less arrogantly, he might be

trusted more. He heads an organisation that needs to be seen as capable of conducting free and fair elections. If senior Opposition leaders ask questions about the way the electoral rolls are being revised, they have a right to real answers. Not dismissed with curt rebuttals.

The election campaign in Bihar has been disappointing, dismal and disturbing. We have seen a parade of our most important political leaders raise issues that will in no way benefit the people of our poorest state. The BJP bared its Hindutva fangs and accused the Congress Party of disrespecting the Sanatan Dharma on the grounds that its leaders have not gone to Ayodhya to pray in the new temple to Ram. Why should that charge resonate with voters in Bihar?

The Congress Party campaign has concentrated on the charge that the BJP has been colluding with the Election Commission to 'steal' elections and that there are plans afoot to steal the election in Bihar. Surely, in their hearts, the heirs to the Dynasty must know that they have lost election after election because the issues they have raised are not issues that capture the imagination of voters. There is much that all our political leaders could learn from the campaign that Zohran Mamdani ran in New York. He started off as the man least likely to defeat a man who comes from a storied political dynasty and won spectacularly. As of last week, he is set to become the next Mayor of New York city.

Bihar betrayed again



FIFTH COLUMN
BY TAVLEEN SINGH

WHEN RAHUL Gandhi exploded his ‘H bomb’ last week, I happened to be aimlessly switching channels in search of news from Bihar. And, when he popped up on my TV screen striding up and down, one hand in pocket and the other clutching a microphone, on a stage whose backdrop was a screen with many voter ID cards, all with the same photo of a beautiful woman, I stopped switching channels. I listened carefully as he demanded to know from his audience of journalists if they knew who this woman was. With the panache of a skilled quizmaster, he demanded to know if anyone knew where she was from, how old she was and if she looked like a Haryanvi woman. When nobody spoke, he revealed dramatically that she was a Brazilian model who appeared to have voted in Haryana many times during last year’s election.

This was certainly intriguing, so I continued to watch. The Leader of the Opposition expounded on his theory that the Haryana election would have been won by the Congress Party if the BJP had not cheated with help from the Election Commission. Rahul Gandhi’s ‘H bomb’ was potent enough for TV reporters to scurry off the next day to the villages where the Brazilian model had voted repeatedly. Sometimes as Sweety, sometimes as Pinky and sometimes as Saraswati. They found that in most cases it was a real Haryanvi woman who had voted with a real voter’s ID card, but with the wrong photograph pasted on it. Nobody knew how the Brazilian model’s picture appeared on their cards. She herself released a video saying she had never been to India. The Election Commission needs to explain.

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There are other issues. The BJP’s mightiest leaders have made some of the ugliest, dangerously rabid speeches during the Bihar campaign. In constituencies where Muslim voters dominate, they have spoken of how they plan to weed out illegal Bangladeshi immigrants and throw them out of India. Remember that the Home Minister once called them termites. If the Congress Party had been true to its secular values, its senior leaders would have called the BJP out and shamed it for once more trying to incite Hindus against Muslims. And for once more trying to remind Muslims that as long as the BJP remains in power in Delhi, they need to get used to being second class citizens. The Prime Minister led the charge against the ‘ghuspatiyas (infiltrators)’ and in doing so lowered the stature of his office. Why does the Congress Party say nothing?

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Freddy’s kick & a patriarchal world’s moral compass

CONFIDENT film production designer believes she is a collaborator. When producer Freddy questions her, she quits, refusing to work with a man who doesn’t know how to talk to a woman. In the end, Freddy kicks her.

When his assistant asks him, “How can you kick a woman?” Freddy says, “Wo kya hain na, Jeejeebhoy, main aurton par hath nahi uthata (I do not raise my hands on women Jeejeebhoy).” This idea of not raising hands on women’ is often presented as a moral compass in the patriarchal universe.

This scene from *B**ds of Bollywood* stayed with me and I decided to use it as a metaphor to view society through its lens.

Gender equality and the contradictions surrounding it go hand in hand. A Press Information Bureau (PIB) release on October 13, 2025, states that the Female Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) increased from 23.3% in 2017-18 to 41.7% in 2023-24 due

many legal safety nets, including laws on maternity benefits and prevention of sexual harassment at the workplace, among others.

Can all women contributing to this increased LFPR access these legal safety nets? The reality of women working in the unorganised sectors is undeniable. We see them approach work in both organised and unorganised sectors differently.

For many, work is an opportunity that puts food on the table. We all know which marginalised communities constitute this underpaid, unorganised female workforce.

For many, work is also about aspirations, rebellion and a demand for dignity. Women land in various workspaces thinking they are collaborators, but often face a different reality. For me, Freddy’s kick amplified the thousands of ‘silent kicks’ they face at work daily. Even when they have legal protections, they are largely dismissed with the same rotting moral notion: that a society that ‘respects



SHE SAID
BY RANI ROHINI RAMAN

women’ can do them no wrong.

The Kolkata professor who lost her job over her personal photo and the unsaid ‘maternity penalty’ are just a few examples. Still, we hear the hollow trumpet of ‘women’s upliftment’ being played without a deeper thought on true upliftment. Meeting rooms often appear to be old boys’ clubs, combined with ‘new boys’ overlooking their male privilege, some women propagating the ‘lean-in’ mantra in most workplaces, the ‘friendly’ suggestion to ‘focus on work’, overlooking caregiving responsibilities or demeaning conditions are experiences that many women share.

In organised sectors, gender equality is a goal often talked about and ‘performed’. But what still stands in the way? Frequent questions about their life decisions: Why marriage? Why not marriage? Why children? Why not children? The expectation is to normalise acts stemming from male privilege,

like interrupting women colleagues, even as women are judged for juggling gender roles and jobs. The list is endless. As a society, we react to visible violence, like Freddy’s kick, but hardly pay attention to silent violations often passed off as ‘organisational needs’.

Freddy’s kick made me reflect on the uncounted ‘kicks’ that women face daily. Freddy’s action could be dismissed as part of his entitled character, but his dialogue on not raising his hands on women resonates perfectly with the hollow promise of ‘upliftment’ offered to women workers. The ‘morality dividend’ of recruiting more women is not enough to cloak the patriarchal microaggressions in workplaces. While the rising numbers should be celebrated, the true celebration is still miles away.

The writer is a Tokyo-based independent researcher National Editor Shalini Langer curates the fortnightly ‘She Said’ column

Trump embraces Xi, Modi in the cold



ACROSS THE AISLE
BY P CHIDAMBARAM

THE MOST consequential leaders of the world today are Mr Donald Trump and Mr Xi Jinping. Others are Mr Vladimir Putin and Mr Benjamin Netanyahu. For good or bad, their words and actions have an impact beyond the borders of the countries of which they are Heads of Government/State. Mr Narendra Modi would like to be among them — his party claims that he is already one of them — but the reality *is* different.

Economic realities

India’s economy is puny (in terms of size) compared to America’s or China’s. In comparison with Russia and Israel, in terms of per capita income, India’s is tiny. Here is the data:

Country	Size of GDP	Per capita income
IN APPROXIMATE NOMINAL USD IN 2025		
USA	30.51 trillion	89,000
China	19.23 trillion	13,800
Russia	2.54 trillion	17,500
Israel	0.6 trillion	54,000
India	4.19 trillion	2,900

America’s economy is 7 times larger and China’s is 4.5 times larger than India’s. India may be the fastest growing large economy but even doubling the GDP will take 10 years from now. In the meanwhile, even at a smaller growth rate (but on a larger base), the GDP of U.S. and of China would become bigger and the absolute *gap* in GDP between India and U.S. and between India and China may grow wider. Russia and Israel may have a smaller GDP but they are richer and their *per capita* income is 6 times and 18 times, respectively, greater than India’s. The math is known to every leader of the world, except India’s current rulers!

The G-2 surprise

The world respects India because it is the most populous country, and for its democracy, history, ancient culture, role as a peace-maker, market size and potential — not because India is a superpower. The countries of the world have a stake in trade and regional peace. Hence, they will engage with both India and Pakistan notwithstanding India’s position that ‘if you are India’s friend, you have to be hostile to Pakistan’.

Besides, the world is changing rapidly. In 2023, India trumpeted that it was the host of the G-20 Summit. The G-20 meeting and Leaders’ Summit are an annual event and the host country is decided by rotation. Brazil was the host in 2024. South Africa will host the meeting/Summit in November 2025 and the U.S. will be the host in 2026. Hosting the G-20 is no big

India is practically friendless in South Asia. West Asian countries are forging new arrangements among themselves and with Israel, without India. It is time to acquire some humility and go back to the policy drawing board

deal; no other country makes a *hoo-ha* about it.

G-8 and G-7 are more significant than G-20. Now, we have something new — G-2. Before and after his meeting with Mr Xi, Mr Trump elevated Mr Xi to the status of an equal, something which he will never do to Mr Modi. Mr Trump was effusive, Mr Xi, as usual, enigmatic. Whatever India may say about a multi-polar world, there are only two superpowers in the world, with Russia closely behind. Yesterday’s “existential threat to U.S. security” has mysteriously vanished. With the new *bonhomie*, QUAD will fall by the wayside.

Do a reality check:

The U.S. has concluded a mini-trade agreement with China on rare earths and soyabean, and the two countries are likely to resolve the Tik-Tok issue. The U.S.-India trade agreement has been negotiated through 2025 but there is no conclusion yet.

There was a tariff war between the U.S. and China (each imposing retaliatory tariffs on the other) but, after the meeting at Busan, the leaders have apparently agreed to a truce on matters including technology transfers, export controls and port fees, and both countries will ease the tariffs mutually. The U.S. has made no move to ease the punitive tariffs on India.

U.S. sanctions on Chinese firms remain; so will sanctions on Indian companies if they buy Russian oil.

America has curtailed preferential access to China’s goods; equally, the revocation in 2019 of Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) that India enjoyed

seems final.

In the cold

Mr Modi last met Mr Trump on February 14, 2025. Subsequently, there were three occasions when a Modi-Trump meeting could have taken place. First, after the G-7 Summit in Canada, Mr Trump invited Mr Modi to ‘stop over’ in Washington, but Mr Modi declined; think rightly. Second, when Mr Modi did not travel to Egypt for the signing of the Gaza peace agreement. Third, the ASEAN Summit and Related Summits in Kuala Lumpur in October 2025 but, inexplicably, Mr Modi decided to address the gathering virtually; I think wrongly. It is widely believed that Mr Modi is keen to avoid a bilateral meeting or even a conversation with Mr Trump.

For the umpteenth time, Mr Trump has claimed that he had used the ‘no trade’ threat to compel India and Pakistan to stop the war, and the war was stopped on the fourth day. Mr Modi has not denied the claim publicly or in Parliament. Besides, Mr Modi has never told Mr Xi in his face that Chinese troops had intruded into Indian territory and they remain illegal occupiers.

The embrace between Mr Trump and Mr Xi has left India in the cold, along with Japan, Australia and Taiwan. India is practically friendless in South Asia. West Asian countries are forging new arrangements among themselves and with Israel, without India. It is time to acquire some humility and go back to the policy drawing board.



HOW TO RAISE A BOY | BY KRUPA GE

I used to think I could curate my son’s world

MY TWO-YEAR-OLD can spot Ambedkar anywhere. On the walls, in the streets, in photographs, on TV. He’ll also point out if he sees someone wearing “Ambedkar kannadi”.

The same with Gandhi.

He can sing Ishwar Allah Tero Naam, because my father taught him the hymn, because his thoughtful aunt gifted a Gandhi matryoshka doll that prompted this session.

He’s a Sanjay Subrahmanyan fan, and requests songs any time he meets Sanjay maama.

Loves thillanas.

Has heard an entire jazz concert mesmerised. Loves brass instruments and percussion. Turns any surface into a drum. And he loves swings.

If only my husband and I could curate who gets to raise our son, we’d fill his life with people and things that aligned with our beliefs like these. After all, we have curated our own adult lives this way. Minimising interactions with those we are unable to reconcile with on the important things.

What I have discovered, however, is that it indeed does take a village to raise a child. Especially one full of verve from the moment he wakes up and is capable of maintaining those energy levels until he finally falls asleep. Much as I want to be the primary influencer of his life, he is a being of his own, has always been. (I am convinced he had strong opinions as a 6-week-old. The way he screamed if we didn’t walk with him at 3am convinced meso.) And because he speaks, and he speaks a lot at such a young age, and because he isn’t anxious about the world, and is looking at it with wonder and love, awe and joy, he has interactions with several people, many ideas, vastly varied approaches to life every single day. And it is impossible for me to handpick his world to be only touched by those whose impeccable taste I approve of.

But I do approve of the large cast of human beings he has made a part of his family. From his grandparents to his babysitter, the aunties in his toddler care, his friends and the many mamas and aunties he converses with freely all day long... they all feed his curious mind. It is his interaction with strangers that brings me most delight and, of course, concern. One morning many months ago, a man dressed as Hanuman appeared at our doorstep with a handheld cymbal, singing songs. Any two objects of that size are now cymbals, and they are accompanied by a song or a chant about Rama from my little one.

As a writer, I would, of course, prefer to introduce him to the myth and lore of the land, and the gods who seemingly are everywhere. But I realise there simply is no time, because before I can decide what and how, someone else has already chanted a political, religious slogan in his presence, only half joking.

His introduction to these politicised, hyper-masculine, always-angry avatars of male gods without my editorial input has been ongoing, as I watch helplessly. As children who grew up on those ubiquitous Amar Chitra Kathas and Doordarshan’s Ramayana and Mahabharata, who now want to control and drip-feed myths to their children... oh the irony writes itself.

After the initial hand-wringing and cursory, pointless fretting, I decided I would do what I could to help him understand this world. (Holding myself up to impossible standards has never been a problem!). And so, I’m trying to take the pressure off my son now, and apply it on to my own self — only this time, to make myself softer. To set the example, by holding myself accountable to others, I share my space with. By trying to figure out how to not fly into rage, and deal with conflict with presence and control. To show him how much I love the softer things for him as well.

Embracing the Montessori way has helped somewhat at this stage, for it emphasises independence and shows us the precious reward of learning is indeed self-sufficiency. I am far from the perfect human, and one who’s painfully aware of her own shortcomings. And I don’t expect to raise a mythical, perfect human son either. But if I were to apply one of the many writing lessons to my life, in raising my son it is: Show, don’t tell. After all, monkey see, monkey do.

The writer is a Chennai-based author (How to Raise a Boy is a fortnightly column)