### SCIENCE

### Gene therapy for maple syrup urine disease shows promise

#### **The Hindu Bureau**

Scientists have created a new gene therapy for a debilitating genetic disorder called maple syrup urine disease (MSUD). The treatment can prevent recurrence of deadly symptoms in a cow-calf born with the disease. Their protocol could one day be translated into a much-needed

therapy for patients with two types of classic MSUD, who currently face limited treatment options. Results were published in Science Translational Medicine.

Classic MSUD arises from mutations in the three genes that encode the protein subunits of the branched chain alpha-keto acid dehydrogenase complex (BCKDH). The loss of this complex prevents the body from properly breaking down several amino acids, eventually leading to neurological symptoms and life-threatening brain damage. To prevent complications, patients must either follow a very strict diet low in protein or receive a liver transplant.

Now, Dr. Jiaming Wang from the University of Massachusetts Chan Medical School, Worcester, Massachusetts and others present a new gene replacement therapy for two types of classic MSUD that uses an adeno-associated viral vector to deliver functional gene copies of BCKDHA and BCKDHB systemically. The therapy worked as intended in knockout cells and was safe in wild-type mice, and also prevented death after birth in mice deficient in either BCKDHA or BCKDHB.

The scientists visited a farm where some newborn calves had perished from classic MSUD. They administered a single dose of their gene therapy, modified to carry bovine genes. to the animal. Over the next two years, the calf grew normally and was eventually able to transition to a normal bovine diet high in protein.

The team plans on further work to characterize the long-term impact of the gene therapy on BCKDH levels in the brain, as well as to determine the treatment's benefits on cognition and behaviour over longer study periods.

# ICMR report links high levels of selenium in wheat to hair loss

The ICMR interim report submitted to the Health Ministry on January 28 found consumption of wheat with high levels of selenium led to 31 times higher selenium in the body causing sudden hair loss

R. Prasad

hree Zika virus cases in Gujarat detected between November 2016 and February 2017 were kept under wraps till WHO announced the outbreak on May 26, 2017; the Health Ministry had informed WHO about the three cases on May 15, 2017. The case of high levels of selenium in wheat distributed by Public Distribution System (PDS) outlets causing increased selenium levels and sudden hair loss in over 300 people in Shegaon taluka in Buldhana district, Maharashtra, seems to be following the same pattern - reluctance of the Health Ministry to keep all the stakeholders informed and make the findings public, and then claim there is no conclusive evidence to link high selenium levels in wheat with sudden hair

Between end-December 2024 and January this year, over 300 cases of sudden hair loss were reported in people living in 18 villages in Shegaon taluka. From January 14-17, a team of scientists from ICMR institutes and AIIMS Delhi visited three villages and collected samples from people affected and unaffected (control) by sudden hair loss. Samples of wheat and rice from affected and unaffected households and from ration shops were collected, as well as water and soil samples. Contrary to claims made by government sources, no other samples of food items were collected for testing by the ICMR-AIIMS team. The samples were sent for testing to ICMR-National Institute for Research in Envi-

#### **Unwillingness to be**

transparent, a recurring tale Over 300 people in Shegaon taluka in Buldhana district, Maharashtra, experienced sudden hair loss

Scientists from 1 ICMR institutes and AIIMS Delhi visited villages from January 14-17 and collected wheat, rice, water, soil and various human samples

2ICMR submitted an interim report to the Health Ministry on January 28. nearly a month before PTI published the results of an independent

3 Selenium levels in the blood were about 31 times higher. Hair had high selenium content

4 Selenium in wheat samples collected from ration shops was twoeight times higher

5 Selenium levels in the affected people were three times more than the unaffected individuals from the



had high levels of selenium, establishing a link between high selenium in wheat and sudden hair loss

A 2016 report in an Indian journal found 15 individuals from two families with high to extreme selenium toxicity had high selenium levels. Selenium in wheat was 250 times higher

PHOTO CREDIT: CDC

ronmental Health (NIREH) from two ration shops and in Bhopal and AIIMS Delhi. a few households of affect-A PTI report published ed people. Water samples

on February 25 said that very high levels of selenium found in wheat was the reason for the sudden hair loss, based on an independent investigation by Dr. Himmatrao Bawaskar of Bawaskar Hospital and Research Centre in Raigad. The ICMR-AIIMS team found high selenium in blood and hair samples of affected people and the link between high selenium levels in wheat and hair loss nearly a month before Dr. Bawaskar's investigation revealed them. But the findings of the ICMR-AIIMS team have not been made public till date.

In an interim report submitted to the Health Ministry on January 28, ICMR clearly said that the amount of selenium detected in the blood of affected individuals was about 31 times higher than controls. The selenium content was also high in wheat samples collected

were tested for nearly twodozen heavy metals, and all were within permissible limits. Based on these findings, the interim report says that high selenium levels in wheat could have caused sudden hair loss. Intake of excessive selenium through food and/ or water leads to a condition called selenosis, which is characterised by hair loss, which is what

Blood samples tested by ICMR-NIREH found that people with sudden hair loss had selenium levels nearly 31 times higher than individuals without hair loss from households with no cases of hair loss in the family. Selenium levels in the affected people were three times more than the unaffected individuals from the same households as the affected people. Blood samples tested by AIIMS Delhi found that the

was seen in people in She-

gaon taluka.

selenium levels were about 25 times more than the controls, and the selenium levels in hair samples from people with sudden hair loss were also high compared with the control group.

Testing by ICMR-NIREH of wheat samples supplied by two ration shops to the affected people living in two villages had selenium two-eight times higher than normal values. The selenium level in the wheat sample collected from a household where an affected person was living was high and comparable to the selenium levels in wheat available at the ration shop. Compared with households of unaffected individuals, people from affected households consumed wheat and rice supplied by PDS shops. The presence of wheat with high levels of selenium both in the ration shops and in the affected households clearly establishes that wheat distributed by the PDS outlets as the

source of selenium for the affected people.

As per a Letter published in 2016 in the Indian Journal of Dermatology, Venereology, and Leprology, a study by the SMS Medical College and Hospital in Jaipur found 15 individuals from two families with high to extreme selenium toxicity. Selenium in wheat samples was 250 times higher. As per a 2004 report in Down to Earth, large tracts of agriculture lands in Hoshiarpur and Nawanshahar districts in Punjab are impacted and people in many villages in these districts are affected by selenium toxicity.

#### **Investigations needed**

It must be noted that while every family receives PDS wheat, not everyone eats this wheat. Many families have wheat grown in their own field. As a result, the wheat samples collected from houses were not necessarily received from PDS shops. Curiously, people who had sudden hair loss in end-December 2024 had good hair regrowth even though they continued to consume wheat supplied by PDS shops This suggests that the exposure to high selenium was only for a short time, probably because only a few sacks of wheat had high selenium levels. The cases were reported only from 12-15 villages, again supporting the hypothesis that only a few sacks would have had high selenium. It is therefore necessary to carry out further investigations by testing additional wheat samples from the entire supply chain of PDS to ensure that high selenium wheat is not present in the supply chain.



#### Breast cancer cases predicted to rise over the next 25 years

People in low- and middle-income countries face higher death rates from breast cancer than those in wealthier nations, because of a lack of screening and treatment options. For example, people aged under 50 in low-income countries are four times more likely to die from breast cancer than those in high-income countries, on the basis of 2022 data. Due to increasing life expectancy and changing prevalence of risk, breast cancer cases and deaths are predicted to rise over the next 25 years.



#### Immunity against H1N1 flu reduces flu severity in ferrets

Pre-existing immunity against seasonal H1N1 flu might help explain why most reported human cases of H5N1 bird flu in the U.S. have not resulted in lethal outcomes, suggests a new study. Pre-existing immunity appeared to influence infection severity in ferrets. Compared to immunologically naïve animals, ferrets with previous infection were protected against severe disease and death caused by H5N1 bird flu strain currently circulating in the U.S. Ferrets without prior immunity had more fatal outcomes.



#### Extreme heat may speed up aging in older adults: study

A study has revealed a correlation between neighbourhoods with more days of extreme heat and individuals experiencing greater increases in biological age. Researchers examined how biological age changed in more than 3,600 participants aged 56 and older from throughout the U.S. Blood samples taken during the study period were analysed for changes in the way individual genes are turned "off" or "on" by a process called DNA methylation.

**Question Corner** 

**Symbiosis** 

actively feed its hosts in

Does anemonefish

the wild?

### Study identifies sources of PM2.5 in northern India

#### The Hindu Bureau

A study published in the journal Nature Communications has investigated the sources and health impacts of PM2.5 in Northern India, particularly in the Indo-Gangetic Plain. The study has examined PM2.5 composition and oxidative potential, a key indicator of its health risks, using samples from five sites: urban and roadside locations in Delhi, rural and industrial peripheries, and a suburban site in Kanpur. Addressing local inefficient combustion processes can effectively mitigate particulate matter health exposure in northern India, the study finds.

The study found that although uniformly high particulate matter concentrations were recorded across the entire region, local emission sources and atmospheric processes dominate particulate matter pollution. "In Delhi, PM2.5 is dominated by ammonium chloride and organic aerosols from vehicular emissions, residential heating, and fossil fuel oxidation," says Dr. Sachchida N. Tripathi, Professor at the Department of Civil Engineering & Department of Sustainable Energy Engineering, IIT Kanpur, and one of the corresponding authors. "Outside Delhi, ammonium sulfate, ammonium nitrate, and biomassburning-derived organic aerosols are more prominent." The study highlights that PM2.5 oxidative potential is primarily influenced by organic aerosols from incomplete combustion of biomass and fossil fuels, particularly from traffic and residential sources. This trend is observed across all locations, emphasising that inefficient local combustion



Major contributor: Traffic can contribute up to 40% of total organic aerosols at urban roadside. GETTY IMAGES

is a major contributor to PM2.5-related health risks. Hydrocarbon-like or-

ganic aerosols originate from fresh vehicular tailpipe emissions. The study found that the highest average hydrocarbon-like organic aerosols concentrations (8 micrograms per metre cube) were recorded at the urban roadside site in Delhi. The hydrocarbonlike organic aerosol concentrations do not show great variations across

Consistent with previous studies, the current study found that hydrocarbon-like organic aerosols are primarily from traffic and contribute up to 20% of total organic aerosols

mass with higher relative contributions in the warm season. From 20%, the contribution from traffic can increase to 40% at an urban roadside. "In all, hydrocarbon-like organic aerosols constitute 50% of the total fossil (coal, petrol, diesel) organic aerosols," says Dr. Tripathi.

Cow dung combustion

during winter for heating and cooking contributes to cold-season primary organic aerosols. The coldseason primary organic aerosols are highly elevated during the night and exhibit spatially homogeneous contribution. Also, concentration of cold-season primary organic aerosols during cold weather is up to 10 times higher than during warmer weather. This is because of increased residential heating or cooking emissions and shallower boundary layer conditions.

Urban oxygenated organic aerosols are affected by both fossil emissions from vehicle exhausts and non-fossil emissions from cooking, and have similar concentration levels across seasons. While hydrocarbon-like organic aerosols and urban oxygenated organic aerosols are especially important inside Delhi, cold-season oxygenated organic aerosol forms outside Delhi, the authors

Comparative analysis shows that the oxidative potential of PM2.5 in Indian cities is among the highest globally, exceeding levels in Chinese and European cities by up to five times. "The study provides crucial insights for policymakers to design effective anemonefish and its effects air quality control strateon the symbiotic gies focused on reducing relationships. When primary emissions from inanemonefish are provided complete combustion," with foods of various sizes says Dr. Tripathi. and types in the field, they

squid, and fish) and green macroalgae of small size, Living symbiotically with while providing larger sea anemones that shelter pieces of animal food to them from predators, their hosts. Food anemonefish (Amphiprion provisioning positively clarkii) drive away influences the growth of organisms that nibble at host anemones as growth their hosts. Anemonefish of anemones directly benefits have also shown they will provide their hosts with anemonefish – the the food given to them by number of eggs laid humans. A new study increases when the hosts shows such feeding are larger, and since behaviour does happen in anemonefish cannot leave their sea anemone, feeding the wild by investigating food provisioning by their hosts is extremely

important.

Readers may send their questions /

selectively consume small

animal food (krill, clams,



### Has Trump put up entry into the U.S. for sale?

What is the 'gold card' proposal? Will it replace the existing EB-5 visa programme?

#### Narayan Lakshman

#### The story so far:

.S. President Donald Trump recently unveiled plans to sell \$5 million "gold card" resident permits to non-Americans worldwide, a long-term visa policy that might eventually offer a pathway to citizenship for the global economic elite. This new visa will replace the existing EB-5 immigrant investor visa for foreigners who can create jobs in the U.S., the latter an option that Mr. Trump's Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick has attacked as "full of nonsense, make-believe and fraud."

#### Why replace the EB-5 visa?

The EB-5 visa was introduced in 1990 with the explicit aim of attracting foreign investors to the U.S. via the residency route, only requiring that they create and support jobs on U.S. soil via direct investment of capital. The investment levels are set at \$8,00,000 in a "Targeted Employment Area", one that faces a certain level of economic distress, and \$10,50,000 outside of such areas. Critics of the EB-5 programme, primarily in the Trump administration, highlight the scope for abuse and fraud within this scheme. While aggregate figures on the scale and frequency of EB-5 fraud and abuse are not available, there is a significant number of documented cases involving misuse of investor funds, for example developers diverting millions

The U.K. and Australia have experimented with similar 'golden visa' initiatives; in both countries it was scrapped 'after interest peaked at a few hundred applications per year'

of dollars intended for projects towards personal use. In terms of governance, the U.S. Congress is responsible for determining citizenship qualifications. In this regard Mr. Trump has

reportedly said that Congressional approval may be unnecessary for the "gold card" visa, an approach that might cause consternation on Capitol Hill.

#### How much revenue will the card raise?

Mr. Trump, while announcing the scheme, expressed hope that "If we sell a million, that's \$5 trillion dollars... I think we will sell a lot because I think there's really a thirst." He also noted that future recipients of the gold visa will be "wealthy and successful and they'll be spending a lot of money and paying a lot of taxes and employing a lot of people." However, close to 75% of billionaires polled by a survey that asked if they would consider this visa indicated that they would not opt for it, primarily because at that level of wealth, they anyway could set up businesses in the U.S. at a lower cost, have options to reside on U.S. soil, and could avoid the U.S. tax net on global income.

Yet there appears to be a lack of clarity on the tax front. While Mr. Trump has said gold card-holders would not be subject to taxes on their overseas income, this would imply that gold card residents will be able to purchase a tax benefit not available to U.S. citizens, effectively creating "dual classes of taxpayers among the American wealthy." That might contravene certain regulations or potentially cause political blowback for the White House if passed into law.

#### What about other countries?

If we were to compare the experience of other advanced economies, both the U.K. and Australia have experimented with similar "golden visa" initiatives, yet in both countries it was scrapped "after interest peaked at a few hundred applications per year", according to London School of Economics Professor Kristin Surak. Greece, the Netherlands, Spain, and Portugal had similar experiences. Ms. Surak's 2023 book, The Golden Passport, examines the global market for citizenship and the wealthy elites who buy their way through it.

The U.K.'s trial of a "gold card" type programme raised another concern - former Home Secretary Suella Braverman said once to the U.K. Parliament that a closer examination of visa grantees indicated that some "were potentially at high risk of having obtained wealth through corruption or other illicit financial activity, and/or being engaged in serious and organised crime." When he was recently asked by media whether Russian oligarchs would be eligible for the card, Mr. Trump said, "Yeah, possibly... I know some Russian oligarchs that are very nice people."

#### How does this tie in with Trump's

immigration paradigm?

The Trump administration is currently in the process of carrying out mass deportations of undocumented migrants in the U.S. Even so, his White House has strongly supported legal migration. Add to this the MAGA focus on gaining transactional advantage through dealmaking with other nations, and the gold visa scheme makes perfect sense as a means to monetise entry into the U.S., while spurring job creation. The test of the success of the programme will depend upon the numbers of those who take up the gold visa offer.

### What were the objections to new Advocates Bill?

Why has the Advocates (Amendment) Bill, 2025 been retracted for now? Why is the Bar Council of India peeved with some of the proposed changes? Why are some of the amendments being seen as an effort to undermine judicial independence?

#### **Aaratrika Bhaumik**

#### The story so far:

n February 22, the Centre withdrew the contentious Advocates (Amendment) Bill, 2025, stating that a revised version incorporating public feedback will be introduced. The Bill sought to amend the Advocates Act, 1961. However, its introduction faced strong opposition from sections of the bar. The government's decision to retract the Bill followed a letter from the Bar Council of India (BCI) to Union Law Minister Arjun Ram Meghwal, pointing out that the proposed amendments threatened the "autonomy and independence of the bar."

#### What is the objective of the Bill?

The Law Ministry underscored the need to amend the 1961 Act to address "contemporary challenges" and align the legal profession with global best practices. It pointed out that seismic shifts in the legal landscape necessitate reforms to better equip lawyers for a rapidly evolving world. The draft Bill comes over a year after the introduction of the Advocates Bill, 2023, which was passed to eliminate "touts" and curb "superfluous enactments" in existing statutes.

#### Are lawyers allowed to go on strike?

A key point of contention in the Bill is its proposed ban on strikes and boycotts by lawyers, citing their disruptive impact on judicial proceedings. It introduces Section 35-A, explicitly prohibiting advocates and bar associations from abstaining from court work. Violations would constitute "misconduct," subjecting offenders to disciplinary action under the 1961 Act and the Bar Council of India Rules,



In rage: Lawyers stage a protest against the Advocates (Amendment) Bill. 2025, in Ajmer on February 21. ANI

A key point contention in the Bill is its proposed ban on strikes and boycotts by lawyers

1975. However, the Bill clarifies that the restriction does not apply to strikes that do not "impede the administration of justice" and are intended to address "legitimate concerns about professional conduct," such as working conditions or administrative issues.

Senior advocate Chander Lall underscored that strikes are a legitimate means for lawyers to voice grievances. "The Bill's withdrawal was a direct consequence of protests led by various bar associations. However, court boycotts and strikes inevitably disrupt judicial proceedings, ultimately harming litigants. That said, I believe the bar exercises restraint and resorts to strikes only in cases of extreme exigency," he told *The* Hindu. Echoing similar sentiments, advocate Nipun Saxena pointed out that strikes have historically served as a powerful tool for the legal fraternity to oppose state excesses. "Barrister Dr. Saifuddin Kitchlew was among the earliest vocal opponents of the Rowlatt Act, 1919, which granted the British government sweeping powers to arrest and detain individuals without trial in colonial India. He organised widespread boycotts of British courts by Indian lawyers....Lawyers have long stood as the first line of defence in safeguarding the rule of law and preserving constitutional values," he said.

#### Is there executive control?

The proposed law allows the Centre to nominate up to three members to the BCI, alongside its existing members – the Attorney General, Solicitor General, and representatives from State Bar Councils. The BCI has strongly opposed this provision, calling it "draconian" and "arbitrarily inserted." The Bill also introduces Section 49B, empowering the Centre to issue binding directions to the BCI, set bar council eligibility criteria, and regulate the BCI's oversight of State bar councils. "Since the government is the largest litigant, it should have no role in an autonomous body like the BCI. Such influence would undermine judicial independence, as advocates serve as officers of the court," Mr. Lal told The Hindu.

The amendments significantly expand the BCI's authority, potentially rendering State bar councils redundant. Traditionally, misconduct complaints against advocates are handled by the disciplinary committees of State bar councils. However, Section 45B now allows the BCI to hear complaints nationwide and suspend advocates at its discretion. Additionally, Section 48B empowers the BCI to dissolve a State bar council and replace it with a committee if it deems the council ineffective. Mr. Saxena argued that these changes undermine the federal structure of the 1961 Act. "The BCI and

State bar councils were created under distinct provisions. Stripping State councils of their core functions reduces them to mere administrative bodies with no real authority," he said.

#### How will it impact corporate lawyers?

The Bill expands the definition of "legal practitioner" under Section 2(i) to include lawyers associated with foreign law firms, corporate entities, and practising advocates. It grants statutory recognition to corporate lawyers working in law firms and as in-house counsel – a long-standing demand that has gained momentum in recent years. Additionally, the Bill empowers the Centre to formulate rules governing the entry of foreign law firms and lawyers into India. This has faced strong opposition from the BCI.

The Bar Council of India Rules for Registration and Regulation of Foreign Lawyers and Foreign Law Firms in India, 2022, allows foreign lawyers and firms to practise law in India on a reciprocal basis. However, these rules were later challenged before the Delhi High Court, with petitioners arguing that the BCI lacked the statutory mandate to permit such practice. "This proposed change would have had little impact on corporate lawyers in law firms, as most are already licensed advocates. However, its implications are far more significant for in-house counsel. A crucial question is whether this move intends to gradually blur the distinction between 'advocates' and 'legal practitioners'. For instance, would in-house counsel be granted rights of audience before courts, arbitral tribunals, and other judicial fora? Moreover, it could have definitively settled the long-standing debate on whether legal privilege extends to advice provided by in-house counsel to their employers", Mrinal Ojha, partner at Solaris Legal told The Hindu. He further pointed out that while the structured entry of foreign law firms into India is a welcome development, the proposed framework remains ambiguous.

"Jurisdictions like Singapore serve as valuable precedents, having successfully balanced the interests of international law firms and the domestic legal fraternity. However, for any regulations introduced by the Centre to be effective, they must be formulated in consultation with all key stakeholders - the BCI, bar associations, and the legal community at large," Mr. Ojha added.

#### What is the way forward?

"The Bill's withdrawal is a welcome step, and one hopes that inclusive dialogue will lead to meaningful reforms. Any changes must safeguard judicial independence and the autonomy of regulatory bodies," Mr. Lal stated.

Mr. Saxena further underscored the need to consult High Courts before implementing any reforms, noting that Section 34 of the 1961 Act empowers them to regulate the practice of advocates before them and subordinate courts.

### Why is India staring at an obesity challenge?

Is there an urban-rural divide? How are prices affecting the right food intake? Why does the rise in obesity have a bearing on non-communicable diseases like diabetes? Why is childhood obesity an area of concern? What is likely to happen in adolescence and adulthood?

still

the rural

poor

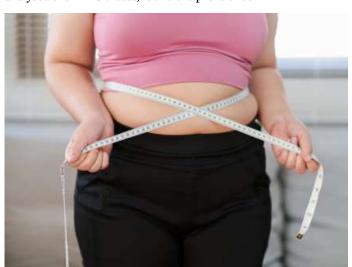
#### Zubeda Hamid

#### The story so far:

arlier this week, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in his 'Mann Ki Baat' radio programme, highlighted the alarming increase in obesity in the country, particularly among children, and noted that obesity affected one in eight Indians. Mr. Modi urged people to reduce oil consumption by 10% each month and stressed that to build a healthy nation, obesity needed to be addressed.

#### What is the scale of the problem?

Overweight and obesity are defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as abnormal or excessive fat accumulation that presents a risk to health. Data from the National Family Health Surveys (NFHS) reveals that obesity has been increasing across India over the years. The percentage of women who were overweight/obese grew from 20.6% during NFHS-4 (2015-16) to 24% during NFHS-5 (2019-21). The percentage of overweight/obese men increased from 18.9% to 22.9% during this period. Urban numbers were significantly higher than rural numbers. A 2023 research paper in The Lancet Regional Health Southeast Asia that analysed the NFHS-5 data, found the prevalence



While obesity is primarily an urban, middle class phenomenon in India, it is already rising among

of abdominal obesity (assessed through waist circumference) in the country was 40% in women and 12% in men.

Childhood obesity is also an area of concern: the percentage of children under five who were overweight rose from 2.1% to 3.4% from 2015-16 to 2019-21, as per NFHS data. With older children the figures are higher – the World Obesity Atlas 2022 estimates that India will have a child obesity prevalence of 10.81% among 5 to 9-year-olds and 6.23% among 10 to 19-year-olds by 2030.

#### What are the health risks?

According to the WHO, obesity in adulthood is a major risk factor for the world's leading causes of poor health and early death. These include cardiovascular disease, several common cancers, diabetes and osteoarthritis. India leads the world in the number of people with diabetes at an estimated 101 million. The burden of cancer is on the rise; from 14.6 lakh cancer cases in 2022, the number is projected to go up to 15.7 lakh in 2025, as per the Indian Council of Medical Research-National Cancer Registry Programme. Moreover, cardiovascular disease remains one of the leading causes of death and disability, reportedly affecting Indians at least 10 years earlier than in other countries. In fact, non-communicable diseases (NCDs) now account for about 60% of all deaths in India.

Being overweight in childhood and adolescence, the WHO says, affects children's and adolescents' immediate health and is associated with greater risk and earlier onset of various NCDs. It can also have adverse psychosocial consequences affecting school performance and quality of life, compounded by stigma, discrimination and bullying. Children with obesity are likely to be adults with obesity.

#### Why is obesity on the rise?

"Rising levels of obesity in urban India are due to a combination of multiple factors: unhealthy diets loaded with ultra-processed foods, lowered levels of physical activity and even air pollution which provokes inflammation that predisposes the body to cardio-metabolic diseases and visceral adiposity in the body," says K. Srinath

Reddy, distinguished professor of public health,

Public Health Foundation of India. Cost is another factor. Low-income households, especially those that depend on the public distribution system, eat more carbohydrates through rice and wheat, says public health professional Vandana Prasad. "You can instruct people to eat better, but it is not possible if these foods are unaffordable. Indian diets, especially among poor families, are deficient in iron and proteins. Foods like fruits, vegetables, pulses, dairy and animal-based foods are all expensive. While at present obesity is still primarily an urban, middle class phenomenon in India, it is already rising among the rural poor, which may soon overtake other segments," she adds.

A study in *The Lancet Global Health* last year said almost half of all Indians are not sufficiently physically active. "Even as indoor sedentariness is increasing due to the seated nature of office work and use of digital devices, outdoor conditions are not conducive to safe and pleasurable physical activity," points out Dr. Reddy. The absence of safe cycling lanes and pedestrian paths are compounded by dimly-lit lanes; green spaces available for recreational physical activity are shrinking while traffic density and rising street crime deter walkers in many urban zones.

#### Is obesity being measured correctly? While the usual metric to measure obesity is the

Body Mass Index (BMI), there has been a growing debate about its limitations. BMI does not indicate how much of the weight is fat and where the fat is distributed in the body. Fat in the abdomen particularly – something that Indians are genetically predisposed to accumulating – contributes to metabolic syndrome, a group of risk factors that increases the chances of developing type 2 diabetes, stroke and heart disease.

This January, experts in India issued updated guidelines for obesity treatment and diagnosis that placed special emphasis on abdominal fat distribution. The classification introduces two stages in obesity – the first stage where there is increased adiposity without discernible effects on organ functions or daily activities, and the second, where both physical and organ functions are impacted. It recommends the use of waist circumference or waist-to-height ratio and body fat measurements, alongside BMI, to diagnose obesity.

### PROFILES

### Twisting in the whirlwind

#### **Volodymyr Zelenskyy**

The Ukrainian President, who in recent past emerged as the face of his country's resistance against Russia's war, has been left in the cold as the U.S., Kyiv's main backer, has reached out to the Kremlin to bring the war to an end

#### **Stanly Johny**

ur two nations are allies in this battle, Volodymyr Zelenskyy said in his address to the U.S. Congress in December 2022. "We have to defeat the Kremlin...This struggle will define in what world our children and grandchildren will live...," he said. The Ukrainian President was accorded a hero's welcome in Washington DC, and both Biden administration officials and lawmakers declared their support for Kyiv. Earlier in the year, while addressing the House of Commons in London, Mr. Zelenskyy compared himself to Winston Churchill, the British wartime Prime Minister, without directly mentioning his name. "We will not give up, and we will not lose," Mr. Zelenskyy said. Many hailed him as a "modern Churchill". He was the 'brave face' of Ukraine's dogged resistance against Russia's "unprovoked" invasion. The U.S. and its European allies said they would support Ukraine "as long as it takes". Mr. Zelenskyy believed them.

Cut to the present. Mr. Zelenskyy went to the White House on February 28 to sign a minerals deal between Ukraine and the U.S. He was welcomed by his American counterpart, Donald Trump, at the Oval Office, before the leaders, along with Vice President J.D. Vance, sat down for a meeting. What followed was an extraordinary public spat between the two Presidents that was telecast across the world. "You right now are not in a very good position. You are not winning this... You don't have the cards right now," Mr. Trump told the visiting Ukrainian President. It was a remarkable turnaround of events for both Ukraine and its leader. How did it happen?

#### Rise to the top

Born to Jewish parents in 1978, Volodymyr Zelenskyy grew up as a native Russian speaker in Kryvyi Rih, in central Ukraine. Joining politics was not even close to young Zelenskyy's imagination. He obtained a law degree from the Kryvyi Rih Institute of Economics, but never took law as a profession. His interests were elsewhere - the world of

entertainment. Mr. Trump recently called Mr. Zelenskyy "a moderately successful comedian". But Mr. Zelenskyy was actually quite successful as an actor and comedian. In 1997, at age 19, he won popularity as his team appeared in the finals of KVN (Club of the Funny and Inventive People), a comedy show that was broadcast across former Soviet republics. He later co-founded a studio, Kvartal 95, and joined hands with Ihor Kolomoisky, one of the wealthiest Ukrainians who owned the popular 1+1 network. Mr. Zelenskyy won national acclaim for his role as the fictional president of Ukraine, who fights the corrupt establishment, in the TV show, Servant of the People. It was this popularity that catapulted him to the centre of Ukrainian politics.

Mr. Zelenskyy promised to fight corruption, reform the system and make peace with Russia during the campaign, and won the second round of the 2019 presidential election with 73.23% vote, against incumbent Petro Poroshenko. But victory also put Mr. Zelenskyy in an unenviable position. Five years prior to his election, Russia had annexed Crimea. Ever since, a separatist civil war had been brewing in Ukraine's east.

After assuming office, Mr. Zelenskyy held a telephone call with Russian President Vladimir Putin, and later announced a preliminary deal with the separatists, who were backed by Russia. In 2020, he declared a formal ceasefire. But none of these efforts brought the fighting in Donbas to an end – the hard-right nationalists on the Ukrainian side, including the Azov Brigade with neo-Nazi links, rejected the deal with separatists, while Russia continued to back the latter. In September 2020, in the midst of the crisis in Donbas, Mr. Zelenskyy unveiled a new national security strategy that called Russia an 'aggressor' and identified NATO membership as Ukraine's key defence and foreign policy objective. Within two years, Mr. Putin would annex the Donbas Oblasts (Donetsk and Luhansk) and launch his invasion of Ukraine.

Mr. Putin may have wanted to wrap up his "special military operation" within days. But Ukrainian resistance



denied a quick victory to the Russians. Mr. Zelenskyy, who refused to leave the country, took shelter in a bunker in the early days of war. The then Israeli Prime Minister, Naftali Bennett, later recalled a conversation he had with Mr. Putin about Mr. Zelenskyy's fate.

When he met Mr. Putin in Moscow in March 2022, Mr. Bennett asked him if he intended to kill Mr. Zelenskyy, to which the Russian leader said 'No'.

"Are you giving me your word that you won't kill Zelenskyy?" Mr. Bennett asked again.

"I won't kill Zelenskyy," said Mr.

Immediately after the three-hour meeting with Mr. Putin, Mr. Bennett called the Ukrainian leader and said: "I've just come out of a meeting -

[Putin] is not going to kill you." Mr. Zelenskyy asked Mr. Bennett, 'Are you sure?' He said, "100%."

Two hours after their conversation, Mr. Zelenskyy took a selfie in his office and posted it with the caption "I'm not afraid," Mr. Bennett recalled in a YouTube interview, published after he left the Prime Minister's office.

#### Fall from grace

The war turned Mr. Zelenskyy into a hero of sorts in the West: the man who stood up to "the evil dictator of Russia". In March 2022, the Russians and Ukrainians were close to signing an agreement after talks in Istanbul to bring the war to an end, but Ukraine, egged on by the U.K. and the U.S., walked out of it at the last minute and

preferred to fight on (according to various accounts by people who were privy to the Istanbul talks). When the Russian troops were forced to withdraw from Kharkiv and later Kherson, Mr. Zelenskyy hailed it as a victory, and vowed to liberate all territories captured by Russia, including Crimea.

Ukraine got weapons worth billions of dollars from the West, mainly the U.S. But Mr. Putin, after the initial setback, announced a partial mobilisation, aimed at fighting a long war. In the following months, Ukraine started losing territories in the east. In 2023, Kyiv launched a much talked-about counteroffensive, with advanced weaponry supplied by the West, aimed at recapturing the territories seized by Russia. But it turned out to be a damp squib. Ukraine's fate was sealed in the months the counteroffensive failed.

But Mr. Zelenskyy continued to put up a brave face. His narrative was that if Ukraine falls, the Russians will march further towards the east, endangering Europe's security. But that was his Plan A and B. It worked as long as Joe Biden was there in the White House. But Donald Trump returned to power with an entirely different agenda and worldview. Mr. Zelenskyy, who was almost entirely dependent on defence supplies from the U.S., was hardly prepared for that.

Now, the Trump administration seems determined to bring the war to an end through a direct deal with the Russians, leaving Mr. Zelenskyy in the cold. He lost more than 20% of his country's territory. His troops are pushed back by the Russians on the battlefield. His country will not become a member of NATO. He is not going to get any security guarantees from the U.S. And, America wants a share of Ukraine's natural resources to recoup the aid it gave to the war-torn country. On top of it all, President Trump now thinks Mr. Zelenskyy is an impediment to peace. "He [Zelenskyy] disrespected the United States of America in its cherished Oval Office," Mr. Trump posted on Truth Social immediately after Friday's meeting was over. "He can come back when he is ready for peace," he said.

#### THE GIST

Zelenskyy, who presented himself as an alternative to the corrupt establishment and promised to make peace with Russia during the campaign, won the 2019 presidential election with 73.23% vote

After assuming office, Zelenskyy held a telephone call with Russian President Vladimir Putin and declared a ceasefire in the east, but those efforts failed to bring peace

In September 2020, Zelenskyy unveiled a new national security strategy that called Russia an 'aggressor' and identified NATO membership as Ukraine's key defence and foreign policy objective. Within two years, Russia invaded

### The outsider within

#### **Shashi Tharoor**

The four-time MP for Thiruvananthapuram has landed in back-to-back controversies after his comments on Kerala's industrial growth and Congress leadership

#### S.R. Praveen

iterature has often been Shashi Tharoor's calling card, at times even more than his politics, but words have also been his Achilles heel in politics, right from the "cattle class" and "holy cows" comments in 2009. Misinterpreted or otherwise, the four-time Lok Sabha MP's utterances and writings have frequently landed him in trouble, inviting the displeasure of the higher-ups in the Congress as well as fellow leaders in its Kerala unit.

The latest instance came last week when, in a newspaper interview, he purportedly underscored the absence of a leader in Kerala's Congress unit and also spoke about other "options", including speaking tours and books, if the Congress did not require his services. Though Mr. Tharoor later accused the newspaper of putting a fake spin on the Malayalam podcast to make it seem as if he was exploring political options, the damage was already done, partly due to the history of his run-ins with the State leadership of the party. The impression that he was making a pitch for a leadership role ahead of the 2026 Assembly elections did not

help matters either. The controversy came close on the heels of anoth-



he said U.S. President Donald Trump's invitation to Prime Minister Narendra Modi was a "significant development" for the country. The next day, in an article, he praised the transformation of Kerala's industrial ecosystem driven by the "staggering growth" in the start-up sector. He also praised the Left Democratic Front (LDF) government's Year of Enterprises initiative, the State's "success" in establishing close to 3 lakh MSMEs since 2022 as well as its topping of the Ease of doing business rankings.

Mr. Tharoor's article, published right ahead of the State government's Invest Kerala Global Summit, came in handy for the ruling LDF, which used it to counter the Congress's dim view of the State's investment climate.

The State Congress leaders, who were not obviously happy at the comments, scrambled to counter his views, with the Congress's

Kerala mouthpiece Veekshanam also levelling some oblique criticism in an editorial. The issue died down only after Mr. Tharoor had a one-to-one meeting with Rahul Gandhi.

#### **Entry into politics**

Mr. Tharoor waded into politics in 2009, carrying with him the glory of a flourishing literary career and a long stint with the UN, which ended in an unsuccessful bid to the UN Secretary-General post. But, right from his early days, he had an "outsider" tag stuck to him, used openly by the opposing parties and more privately by his fellow party members.

Yet, he made up for the challenges he faced, including the not-so-friendly local party leadership, with his personal charisma. For four consecutive terms, he has held on to the Thiruvananthapuram Lok Sabha seat, which before his arrival used to alternate between the Congress and the Left. But, since 2014, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has been giving him a close fight, with the 2024 win by a slender margin of 16,077 votes. The outsider tag still follows him, as even local Congress members are not so happy about his prolonged absence from the constituency.

Of late, Mr. Tharoor has begun priming himself for alternative and more ambitious roles. With opinions often at variance with the leadership, he has in recent years consistently played the role of the disruptor within the party, first as one of the 23 Congress leaders (G-23) who sought reforms within the party, which culminated in his making an unsuccessful bid to the party leadership post in 2022. His current manoeuvres

in Kerala closely resemble his actions at the national level in recent years. Coming a year ahead of a crucial Assembly election, in which the Congress is attempting a comeback after being kept away from power for an unprecedented two terms, his purported comments on the leadership attain added significance.

Though Mr. Tharoor's intentions are barely concealed, it is not going to be an easy ride to the top for someone who has ruffled so many feathers within his own party.

### The conservative turn

#### Friedrich Merz

The man who could become Germany's next Chancellor has promised to impose border controls, revive the country's economy and keep supporting Ukraine and Israel

#### Joan Sony Cherian

hile addressing

the media after the results of Germany's Feb. 23 election were out, the leader of the leading conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and its Bavarian sister party, Christian Social Union, Friedrich Merz, opined that the staggering rise of the right-wing Alternative for Germany (AfD), with its vote share of almost 20%, is a "real warning bell, a real alarm bell for the political parties". However, for someone who has strongly ruled out any coalition with the AfD, the about-to-be Chancellor was more than happy to receive support from the AfD, effectively breaking the 'Brandmauer' or firewall that political parties have kept with the rightwing post the Second World War, for the motions he raised in the Bundestag in January on restricting immigration and asylum.

Mr. Merz's tougher stance on immigration has been seen as an attempt to gain some section of rightwing voters, especially in east Germany. In light of a knife attack carried out by an Afghan immigrant in the city of Aschaffenburg on January 22, Mr. Merz had promised that if he became Chancellor, he would "impose permanent borneighbours and refuse all attempts at illegal entry". He stated that the knife attack was evidence of a "failed" immigration system. Mr. Merz was born into an affluent family, with his father also being a member of the CDU. Mr. Merz joined the CDU as a young boy, and was briefly engaged in the military before becoming a lawyer. Keen to make his entry in politics, he was elected to be a member of the CDU's wing in the European Parliament in 1989. After being elected to the German parliament in 1994, Mr. Merz established himself in the CDU as a leading economic policy expert, and was a fa-

However, after the rise to power of CDU stalwart Angela Merkel, Mr. Merz resigned from politics in 2009 and went back to practising corporate law full-time. In the interim, before his return to the der controls with all our CDU in 2018, Mr. Merz

CDU.

vourite of the more conser-

vative faction within the

served on the board of many multinational companies and trusts. Always staunchly pro-business, Mr. Merz was until recently a strong supporter of the U.S. and trans-Atlantic trade. Under President Donald Trump however, Mr. Merz has stated that the U.S. seems indifferent to Europe's fate, and that the continent needs to build its own defences without relying on the U.S.

ILLUSTRATIONS: SREEJITH R.KUMAR

**Rivalry with Merkel** Before his exit from politics in 2009, Mr. Merz was considered an up and coming leader of the CDU, and even became the parliamentary leader of the party in 2000. However, his rise to the very top was blocked by the increasing dominance of Ms. Merkel, who was the chairwoman of the CDU at the time. To Ms. Merkel, Mr. Merz was a tad too conservative to be a centrist as she was, and after the party's electoral defeat in 2002, she removed Mr. Merz from his post as

the parliamentary leader. Therefore, it is unsurprising that his return to the party was after Ms. Merkel resigned from the CDU leadership.

After being sidelined by Ms. Merkel, Mr. Merz's bid for leadership of the CDU was thwarted twice - once in 2018 and the other in January 2021. He was finally elected party leader in December 2021, and has shown himself to be quite a different leader compared to Ms. Merkel – central to this being his vastly different stance on immigration in contrast to Ms. Merkel's open borders policy.

Apart from a divided polity and an unpredictable U.S. government, Germany's economic woes are aplenty. The economy, suffering from the phasing out of cheap energy from Russia and the strict 'debt brake', needs a major boost, which Mr. Merz has promised to deliver by cutting down expenses on bureaucracy. Additionally, Mr. Merz, who is critical of the Russian regime, has offered all support to Ukraine. Mr. Merz is also an avid supporter of Israel, and has said that he will invite the Prime Minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu, to Germany after he becomes Chancellor in open defiance of the International Criminal Court's arrest warrant for Mr. Netanyahu.

{ THE BIG PICTURE }

### How Delhi can clean its air substantially in three years

An increased supply of public transport, reducing open burning in the NCR, and enforcing dust and other pollution control measures at construction sites will help achieve this

elhi has a new government and chief minister. In its manifesto, the winning party promised a Delhi Clean Air Mission that would halve the average AQI by 2030. Air pollution — a perennial problem — is one of the biggest public health challenges for India and also results in loss of investments, erosion of GDP growth, and lower productivity. In 2013, Beijing's average PM2.5 (the key pollutant) was around 100 µg/ m³, but today, the annual average stands slightly below 40 μg/m³, which incidentally is the National Ambient Air Quality Standard in India. In contrast, Delhi's annual average PM2.5 was a "poor" 102 μg/m³ in 2024. Although estimates vary, a significant share of the city's pollution originates within. Delhi can lower PM2.5 levels to at least a "moderate" level of 80  $\mu g/m^3$  by 2028 by taking action on

Attributing air pollution to the sources that cause it is not an exact science. Despite the unceasing interest in the Capital's air quality, assessments of sources remain too dated, sporadic, and seasonal to authoritatively state the exact contribution from each. However, that does not justify inaction within the city — we have sufficient data to identify the main culprits. Transport, biomass and solid-fuel burning, waste burning and dust contribute year-

round. Industrial units outside Delhi's borders add to the burden. In winter, external sources such as stubble burning compound the problem. Our synthesis of existing studies and reasonable assumptions to fill in data gaps provides the basis for this targeted action plan to improve the city's air in three years.

First, reduce and clean up private vehicles on the road and increase the supply of public transit services. Transport accounts for about

half the share of air pollution attributed to sources within the city, with personal vehicles accounting for 60% of it. While the shift to BS-VI has already put transport emissions on a downward trajectory, the continued plying of end-of-life (EoL) vehicles (diesel over 10 years, petrol over 15) originating within and outside Delhi adds to the emissions burden. Further, only 2% (4W) and 7% (2W) of new sales in Delhi are electric vehicles (EVs). The city should mandate 30% EV sales for personal vehicles by 2026 and 50% by 2027. The EoL phase-out through automated number plate recognition must be strictly enforced while giving sufficient notice to those impacted.

Further, Delhi will see a 20% rise in on-road vehicles by 2030, resulting in more congestion and rising exhaust and non-exhaust emissions. So, the city must go beyond just electrification. Reduce private vehicle use by implementing zonal access pricing and cracking down on rampant on-street parking. Bus services must be augmented to meet the benchmark of 60 buses per lakh population (currently at 33 in Delhi). However, public transit will only work with improved last-mile connectivity and walking infrastructure. All these measures can provide at least a 33% reduction in PM2.5 contribution from the

transport sector — and a drop of 9 µg/m³ around the year.

Second, address open sources of burning in the city and promote domestic clean fuel use. To curb open waste burning, authorities should map dumping and burning sites through field surveys or data from public grievance systems and establish a punitive mechanism. Bulk waste generators (malls, schools, hotels) produce 30-40% of Delhi

NCR's waste and must be incentivised to carry out in-situ organic waste management and material recovery Additionally, Delhi's new government should accelerate the bioremediation of the three major landfill sites on mission mode and allow no new waste to make its way there.

Arunabha

Ghosh

Karthik

Ganesan

To curb winter biomass burning for warmth, resident welfare associations (RWAs) and trade associations, with top-up financial resources from the city administration, must provide heaters and protective workwear to night workers and guards. Delhi urgently needs more homeless shelters to provide winter relief and reduce open biomass burning.

In 2025, enrollment in the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana must be made easier in the Delhi-NCR by lowering enrollment barriers, especially for those residing in non-notified bastis and jhuggi-jhopri colonies, and vagrant populations. By 2026, clean fuels — LPG and electricity — must be the sole source of cooking energy, aided by restrictions on firewood sales and behaviour change campaigns. Targeted subsidies to ensure clean fuel use in winter will also be needed. A 60% reduction in emissions from waste and biomass burning in public spaces and solid fuel usage in homes can lead to a drop of around 6 µg/m³ year-round.

Third, ensure compliance at construction



We must treat Delhi's air like a patient in a multi-speciality hospital; it needs coordinated interventions across sectors and

sites and control road dust. Existing regulations on construction and demolition mandate the monitoring of air quality but lack clarity on technology, placement of monitors, and use of data for compliance. In 2025, a detailed air quality monitoring protocol should be rolled out for construction sites larger than 500 sq.m. Committing to a dust mitigation schedule as part of a construction project plan should be mandated for project approval by the Municipal Corporation of Delhi. The dust pollution control self-assessment portal administered by the Delhi Pollution Control Committee should be updated with an alert system to drive enforcement. Authorities could consider having an earnest money deposit for project proponents, which would be encashed if projects are found to violate dust mitigation schedules.

Additionally, each year, the government allocates a substantial budget for mechanised sweepers, water sprinklers, and anti-smog guns. In 2025, these resources must be repurposed to ensure kerb-to-kerb black-topping of unpaved roads. A division within the Public Works Department (PWD) must be created to coordinate approvals and see through the completion of all civil works involving road infrastructure. A 50% reduction in construction and road dust within Delhi would lead to a 3 µg/m³ drop in PM2.5 levels.

Finally, reduce stubble burning by at least 50% in Punjab and Haryana (leading to a drop of 14 μg/m³ on average during the burning period and up to 40 µg/m³ at peak). To avoid 'severe" winter peaks in Delhi from mid-October to mid-November, it is imperative that we focus on reducing stubble burning. Farmers need viable alternatives, not just penalties. In 2025, revise paddy procurement norms to align with the yield of short-duration rice varieties like PR-126, which reduces stubble burning since it matures early. Further, rental efficiencies for straw management machines must be improved through user-friendly machine booking systems and standardised rental rates. For ex-situ management, setting a benchmark price for selling crop residue based on moisture content and calorific value

will ensure farmers receive viable payments By 2027, crop residue management should be integrated into Voluntary Carbon Markets to attract private investment to offset operational costs and incentivise zero-burn practices.

We must treat Delhi's air like a patient in a multi-speciality hospital; it needs coordinated interventions across sectors and high-quality data to assess progress. The patient needs emergency care during winter but also sustained treatment throughout the year. Within three years, we can avoid severe air quality days, and by 2030, we can all breathe substantially cleaner air, boosting our life expectancy and livelihoods. This is not the time for despair but for concerted action-by the State, markets, and citizens.

Arunabha Ghosh is CEO and Karthik Ganesan is fellow and director (strategic partnerships), at the Council on Energy, Environment and Water (CEEW). Co-authored with Abhishek Kar. senior programme lead, CEEW. The views expressed are persona

{ SUNDAY SENTIMENTS }

Karan Thapar



## Is Trump making America great or diminishing it?

hen I was young, the Donald I associated with America was the duck. These days, it's Trump. That makes me wonder which of the two is more representative of this powerful nation?

Georges Clemenceau, who was prime ninister of France both before an World War I, thought of America in not dissimilar terms. He's reputed to have said, "America is the only country in the world to have progressed from barbarism to decadence without experiencing the intervening stage of civilisation." I wonder what he would have made of Trump?

The incredible, if not unbelievable, spat that has broken out between Donald Trump and Volodymyr Zelensky is not just unedify ing but also an interesting illustration of the American President's behaviour. But to understand what happened on Friday, you need to go back to events since January.

Donald Trump called Zelensky a "dictator" who's done "a terrible job". He claims Zelensky only has 4% support even though Ukraine's own polls insist it's 57%. The 4% figure, Zelensky says, is Russian propaganda.

hat's not al ensky as "a modestly successful comedian", whilst accusing him of starting the Russia-Ukraine war and adding he "better move fast or he is not going to have a country left".

In interviews about the talks his government is having with Vladimir Putin's, from which Zelensky and the rest of Europe are pointedly but inexplicably excluded, Trump has maintained that the Russian President wants peace, that he trusts him and also believes Russia has the upper hand. Of Zelensky, he's claimed he's not important enough to be included!

Zelensky hasn't exactly kept quiet although he might have been better advised to do so. He's accused Trump of living in a Russian "disinformation bubble". That sounds like a euphemism more than criticism. He's also disputed Trump's \$500 billion bill for aid to Ukraine. He's dismissed it as "not serious". As far as I can tell that's all he's said.

However, it was sufficient to provoke both US vice president JD Vance and national security advisor Michael Waltz. They took to the air waves to warn Zelensky not to badmouth Trump, even though the person doing the badmouthing is Trump

Now, what should we make of all this? Donald Duck, a model of good behaviour with a gentle sense of humour, would not en amused. He would have quacke with disapproval. Clemenceau would have seen this as proof of his opinion. Only the decadent would behave like this.

Let me, however, ask a different question. Have you ever come across an instance of an American president publicly belittling a fellow head of government, who is an ally, whilst taking the side of an adversary? Isn't this the exact opposite of what

you would expect? In turn, that raises a further question: Is it only the American President, because of his power and, indeed, his unique personality.

who can get away with such conduct? Or is there a danger that other heads of government might begin to speak and behave similarly? In other words, is Trump's behaviour the harbinger of a new form of politics? A

new normal, so to speak.

I presume only heads of government of powerful countries can get away with addressing presidents of smaller states in this fashion. In school, we called that bullying. Nowadays, it's probably considered realpolitik or, even, Statecraft.

Finally, Trump's behaviour raises a critical, if disturbing, question about the America of today. After abandoning wokery, which the Republicans define as diversity, equality and inclusion, is anything any longer verboten? Is it now acceptable to say anything, imply everything and lash out unreservedly? Even if it's untruthful, unfair America will be made great again? Or is it diminishing itself? Shrinking its stature? Undermining its moral standing?

Friday's spat will have terrible implications for Ukraine, Europe and America itself. The only person smiling is the Russian President. However, I wouldn't be surprised if in time Trump regrets his rudeness. But, by then, will it be too late?

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

#### { ENGENDER }

Lalita Panicker



### Safer cities hold the key to women's well-being

ith the new government in Delhi, we now have several "double-engine" governments across states. This gives hope that women's safety issues will get the priority promised election after election. The AAP government e as a solution, but is this effective?

A Woman's Place is in a Safe City, a study by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Data+Feminism Lab in collaboration with Point of View, Red Dot Foundation, and several Kolkata-based civil society organisations, gives us some insights. The study found that under the Safe City Project, 46% of the Nirbhaya Fund is allocated to surveillance and policing. The research questions whether State surveillance effectively prevents the violence women face in public spaces. It also examines the role of digital surveillance in shaping women's visions of safe cities and proposes six areas for reallocating State funds to realise this vision. While surveillance can be empowering, it cannot replace on-ground measures that enhance safety for women. For instance, well-lit streets are crucial; a CCTV camera is ineffective without proper lighting.

Mobility is vital for women, and safe transportation can reshape their perception of secure spaces. Karnataka's free bus scheme for women has significantly improved both mobility and safety. Surveillance by street vendors can enhance safety, as their presence attracts people and provides well-lit areas.

Police and service providers must respond compassionately, as women often face dismissal or trivialisation of their complaints. A Tata Institute of Social Sciences initiative pairs social workers with police to support women experiencing harassment and violence.

The good news is that addressing violence against women has gained urgency with rising community leadership, legal advocacy, and grassroots movements. The SHG movement has empowered women to organise and voice concerns about domestic violence and discrimination. Legal advocacy has been vital in advancing women's rights. However, challenges in enforcement remain. Less than 20% of eligible women access legal aid services under the Legal Services Authorities Act (1987), hinov information deficit obstacles, and social stigma.

Grassroots intervention in Ajmer district shows that enhanced survivor-centred governance to address violence against women in 10 villages of Silora block, helped tackle the immediate risks faced by adolescent girls and women, while also fostering a robust ecosystem to support survivors and encourage duty bearers and decision-makers to challenge harmful gender and cultural norms. Akhila Sivadas, executive director, Centre for Advocacy and Research, says, "By expanding these efforts and institutionalising successful practices across states with high incidence of violence, we can not only stop violence but also promote decentralised governance and women's participation in decision-making.

Significant progress has been made at the block level through gram sabhas and community meetings, developing actionable plans and administrative measures like improved lighting, safe transportation, constituting internal complaints committees, and setting up suraksha samitis to enforce anti-harass ment policies, and policing and legal redress.

Addressing violence against women neces sitates a multifaceted approach that integrates grassroots mobilisation with decentralised governance, underpinned by suitable institutional arrangements and system strengthening. Current precedents reveal the challenges women face and the potential for transforma tive change through collective action and legal advocacy. By leveraging these foundations, we can foster a violence-free environment. This should be the aim of the Nirbhaya Fund.

The views expressed are personal

### Learning linear algebra, courtesy the local salon brand ambassadors of hair vitality. The paint was peeling off from their faces, showing how t's a truism from my childhood and ado-

Abhishek

Asthana

lescence: Many schoolboys did not have girlfriends because their parents elected their barber. The brief was simple: make the child look as unattractive to the opposite sex as possible so that the only option left was to learn linear algebra, go to college, and eventually succumb to an arranged marriage. Even when you are old enough to earn your bread and pay for your haircut, the childhood trauma ensures you don't really know how to brief the hairdresser. Like all of your choices in life, where you have tried to get the best of both worlds, be it your food or your haircut, when the barber asks "How should I cut it?", you say,"Medium".

I am that guy. We are the value maximisers who want our curries to be medium spicy and our golgappas to have both the red and green water. This middle-class trait of trying out two options at the price of one has been burnt into us.

And here I was with my medium haircut, travelling to my hometown to pick up my parents for a visit to the Maha Kumbh. As I landed and touched my mother's feet, she noticed that my full head of hair was breaching the periphery of my ears. "What will the relatives think when they see you?" She turned to my father, "Please take him to Vinod (the local barber)". I intervened quickly, out of PTSD, and promised to visit Vinod in one or two business days. I was forced to go the same day.

Vinod named his shop, Lucky Haircutting Saloon, kind of a warning that there was some luck involved in getting a good haircut. The shopboard had actors Anil Kapoor and Sanjay Dutt hand-painted on it, the traditional

long Vinod had been doing this. He has been invited to enough arranged marriages of kids he used to give haircuts to.

As I entered, several heads turned — people getting a shave, with lather on their faces, stared at me, as did their assigned barbers. An Indian barbershop is like a kaleidoscope; with mirrors tilted, it's an infinite number of people getting their shave, all staring at you. It's intimidating. I was signalled to sit on a bench that already had three people waiting, all of them engrossed in film magazines from the 1990s. One cover had a shirtless picture of a

hirsute Akshay Kumar, and another had a prominent actress wearing just a python. There was a small TV kept on a higher plane, playing Zee Cinema movies. Most of the equipment, including the shaving kit, was from a museum. The model on the shaving-cream box was most likely dead. It was a time machine.

Vinod's shop doesn't have a wall clock; he says he doesn't want people to quantify their wait time. It's an old trick. though, now ruined by smartphones. Millions of such trade secrets run the Indian economy. Anyway, the loyal clientele of Lucky Haircutting Saloon aren't really running late for breakfast meetings, so it's fine. Including me, who's here in his hometown, being obedient, giving in to the control his parents have exerted on him since childhood. Finally, it's my turn. I am greeted by a wide smile from Vinod. He has figured out I am "Asthana ji ke bada ladka" (the elder son of Mr Asthana) and asks me when I arrived. I reciprocate with some small talk, as he



Parents select barbers for their children to make the latter look unattractive and kill all possibility of youthful romance that distracts from studies.

drowns me in a black cloak and starts spraying water around; he doesn't bother asking me how I want my hair to be. He knows my answer. As I stare at the 6x6 grid of hairstyles he has hung in his salon, featuring wirv men who look like my father in his youth, I sit motionless. I have given in. Vinod sprays more water around my temples, on my neck, and on my scalp. It feels good. I will slowly fall into a vegetative state, where he'll upsell

Soon, the clickety clack of scissors begins. In between switching tools, this guy believes in throwing complimentary bursts of *champi* (head massage); it sounds awesome, but this is all part of a cunning plan. Slowly, my eyelids go heavy. And then at an opportune moment, the guy slowly whispers into my ears, "Sir bahut dandruff ho gaya hai, ek naya serum laga du?" (Sir, there is too much dan-

druff; should I apply a serum?) By this time, the logic processing unit of your brain has shut down. I barely manage a grunt. And he takes this as a go-ahead and applies a potion made of pigeon tears or a similar formulation. His apprentices are

impressed by their boss's upselling skills and make a mental note of this smooth sales pitch. Now Vinod has reached the climax of my haircut; he takes out a fresh shaving blade. neatly breaks it into two, asks me to check the authenticity, assuring me the haircut doesn't come with a complimentary HIV infection. and slides it in his ustara. The whole routine is my favourite, after the powder work, of course. Questionable talcum powder, lavishly dabbed around your neck. It's been 30 years, but I still don't know why they do that.

My haircut is done. Vinod introduces another mirror to the kaleidoscope, to help me check the haircut at the back. I nod. The cloak is taken off in a flash, the seat is prepared for the next benchwarmer. I'm done. and I offer him some extra cash. Vinod gets a bit overwhelmed. I feel it's a small fee to pay for cutting my hair considering that my only option was to master linear algebra and reach where I am now. Thanks, Vinod bhai.

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

#### { SUNDAY LETTERS }

#### India's role in climate action

This is with reference to 'Why climate leadership is set for a China-India tango' by Aparna Roy (February 23). The urgency of mitigation action cannot be overstated. The world needs resolute leadership, and India has the opportunity to step forward as a key driver of meaningful progress.

Gayatri Sharma

#### Why words matter

This is with reference to 'Twattling does not make a person ultracrepidarian' by Karan Thapar (Feb 23). It is heartening to know that some words still carry meaning in our modern world. Ultracrepidarian deserves wider recognition in today's age

**Praveen Kumar** 

#### The true measure of life

but in community, and a zest for life.

This is with reference to 'Live life full, not in excess or to prolong the lifespan' by Pavan K Varma (Feb 23). We must remember that true longevity is not found in pills

Sameer G

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Fifth

**COLUMN** 

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# Starting an unprovoked war

UNPROVOKED WARS are not intended to achieve a lofty goal but to advance a partisan ideology. BJP has a penchant for starting unprovoked wars. The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the Uniform Civil Code (UCC) are examples. They were not designed to fulfill any felt necessity. Both CAA and UCC were pushed by the RSS-BJP to create discord among Hindu and non-Hindu communities.

The central government has blown the bugle of another unprovoked war, this time on language. The so-called 'three language formula' (TLF) was first mooted by the Radhakrishnan Committee. It was dead-on-arrival. No state has ever implemented TLF.

#### TLF NOT A PRIORITY

There were many reasons. The first priority was naturally given to building schools and appointing teachers. The second was universal enrollment and keeping the children in school. Next was to improve the quality of teaching — not only of languages but of other equally important subjects like mathematics, science, history, geography and social studies. Those tasks are incomplete after 78 years of independence.

Language became an explosive issue not because of 'education' but because of Article 343 of the Constitution. It declared that Hindi shall be the official language of the Union but English shall continue to be used for a period of 15 years. The fifteen years ended in 1965. An unthinking government declared that, with effect from January 26, 1965, Hindi

would be the sole official language. The reaction was immediate and spontaneous. Tamil Nadu erupted, and a Dravidian party rose to power. Jawaharlal Nehru had made a promise that English will continue as Associate Official Language as long as the non-Hindi speaking people wanted it. At the height of the 1965 crisis, Indira Gandhi alone had the courage and the wisdom to defy the zealots and repeat the promise.

More than the promise, the exigencies of administration obliged the central government to be bilingual. Hindi, like other Indian languages, was not versatile enough to cope with the demands of science, law, economics, engineering, foreign trade, foreign relations, international bodies, etc. State governments are bilingual too and depend on English for passing legislation and many aspects of administration.

Meantime, there have been three developments with far-reaching consequences. One, in 1975, 'Education' was transferred from the State List to the Concurrent List eroding the autonomy of the states as far as school education is concerned. Two, India embraced liberalisation and globalisation in 1991 and, inevitably, English. Three, there was a demand from parents for English medium schools, and it is growing.

#### WHICH IS THIRD LANGUAGE?

The present conflict is over aspects of the New Education Policy (2020) and, in

particular, TLF. The regional/state language is the 'first' language in schools, English is the 'second' language, but which is the 'third' language?

The Union Education Minister has a glib argument. The NEP is a national policy and every state is Constitutionally obliged to adopt the policy. Further, while NEP mandates the teaching of a third language, it does not stipulate that the third language must be Hindi. Mr Dharmendra Pradhan feigned innocence when he asked, why is the government of Tamil Nadu opposed to the NEP and the teaching of a third language?

The answers are simple: (1) NEP is

the policy of the current central govern-

ment and not mandated by the

Constitution and (2) the official policy of successive governments in Tamil Nadu has been that two languages — not three — will be taught in *government* schools. The TN government has put no impediment to *private* schools offering Hindi as a subject. Kendriya Vidyalaya schools and schools in Tamil Nadu affiliated to CBSE (642), ICSE (77) and IB (8) offer Hindi, and thousands of children learn Hindi. The government also does not stand in the way of lakhs of children learning Hindi through the Dakshin Bharat Hindi Prachar Sabha or similar organisations.

#### ONE LANGUAGE IN MANY STATES

As far as NEP is concerned, NEP has both good features and unacceptable features. One of the controversial features

is TLF. TLF is *not* enforced in the Hindispeaking states but sought to be *enforced* in the non-Hindi speaking states. It is a matter of record that government schools in Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Haryana follow effectively a one-language policy of only Hindi. Most children enrolled in government schools in these states learn no other language because there are few English teachers and hardly a teacher of any other language. Private schools are happy to follow government schools and teach Hindi; many also teach English but not a third language. In the few schools that offer a third language, it is invariably Sanskrit. In states like Punjab, Gujarat and Maharashtra, the third language is Hindi, but it is well known that Punjabi, Gujarati and Marathi have a close kin-

Besides, the quality of English taught is appallingly poor. Children studying in government schools where English is taught hardly speak English outside the English classroom. This is true for all states, Tamil Nadu included. Before the Minister of Education bullies Tamil Nadu into accepting TLF — really Hindi as the third language — he should make a success of teaching two languages (the regional language and English) all over India. Spoken English is scarce; good spoken English is rare.

ship with Hindi.

Government has *failed* to teach English, the agreed second language; why does the government have ambitions to <u>succeed</u> in teaching a third language?

### The ghost of **Bofors returns**

LAST WEEK I read the most important book about India's political culture that I have read in a long time. It is called 'Boforsgate' and has been written by Chitra Subramaniam without whose outstanding investigative journalism the truth about the bribes that Bofors paid to sell their howitzers to the Indian army may never have come out. Chitra risked her life, her marriage and her sanity in pursuit of the truth. But this is not just her story. It is the story of the ugly underworld below the surface of politics in Delhi. An underworld where criminals, corrupt

My journey as a political columnist began when Rajiv Gandhi was prime minister, so I remember well the events and cast of characters that Chitra describes in her book. Immediately after Swedish state radio announced in April 1987 that Bofors had bribed Indian politicians and high officials to win Sweden's biggest arms export deal the sordid plot to erase the money trai began. In the circles in which I moved everyone knew that Ottavio Quattrocchi and his wife, Maria, were the best friends of Rajiv and Sonia Gandhi.

politicians and compliant officials thrive.

Everyone knew that when Indira Gandhi was prime minister this fertiliser salesman had an extraordinary ability to win contracts for Snamprogetti where he then worked. We also knew that Sonia's parents stayed in the Quattrocchi family home when they came to India. After Rajiv became prime minister, Quattrocchi was often heard telling people in Delhi's drawing rooms that if they needed something from the government, he could be helpful. Then when it was revealed, in July 1999, that two of the secret bank accounts in which Bofors' bribe money was traced belonged to him and his wife, he fled India never to return. It is worth remembering that almost the last thing Dr Manmohan Singh did before the 2009 general election was to unfreeze a bank account that belonged to him in London and had been frozen by the Government of India.

The reason why 'Boforsgate' is such an important book is because corruption is still India's biggest political problem. It is to make money and not out of a desire to serve this country that most people come into politics today. Politics is the easiest way to make big money in our ancient land. This is why political leaders ensure that their constituencies pass onto their children. I have closely observed how these political heirs almost magically make enough money to be able to buy properties in foreign lands, stay in expensive hotels and send their progeny to fancy foreign schools.

This new political culture began with Bofors. It was the first time that a close associate of the Prime Minister was caught in an act of bribery endangering national security. Rajiv Gandhi denied in Parliament that he or any member of his family had taken Bofors bribes, but ordinary Indians did not believe him and one big reason why he lost the election in 1989 was Bofors. Once the campaign began, I remember having conversations about Bofors in tea shops in tiny villages. The outrage was huge, and rural musicians sang songs about how India could not be

After Atal Bihari Vajpayee became prime minister, I once ran into Arun Jaitley on a flight to Malaysia and he said that he was on his way to get Quattrocchi. This never happened because for some reason Vajpayee lost interest in pursuing the case and for some reason Narendra Modi who became prime minister with the promise to end corruption has lost interest as well. To quote Chitra, "Since 1997, India has had the documents of the Bofors case from Switzerland. Names of recipients, percentages of commission, instruction to the banks and much more that would help a genuine investigation to move ahead remain in boxes with the CBI." Why?

governed by 'Italy's son-in-law'.

although no corruption charges can be pinned on him personally, there are BJP chief ministers and ministers in his government who are having a merry old time making money? Could it be that when it comes to looting Mother India there exists a bipartisan consensus among politicians and high officials? It certainly seems that way. As for us 'watchdogs' in the media, we know that journalists can be jailed and sometimes killed for exposing even the smallest little scandal. Remember that journalist in Uttar Pradesh who spent six months in jail for exposing corruption in

a Mirzapur school midday meal scheme? Chitra is without question India's

Could it be because Modi knows that

finest investigative reporter but when I finished reading 'Boforsgate', I found myself wondering if she would have still been alive if she lived in India and not Switzerland. There are those who say that the media has only come under pressure since Modi became prime minister. They are wrong. When I tried to investigate if there was a larger conspiracy behind the assassination of Indira Gandhi, I was hauled up before the commission investigating her death and asked many questions about 'my Pakistani connections'. I immediately stopped asking questions. What has changed since Modi became

prime minister is that he is so allergic to criticism that almost the whole media has been 'managed'. Our vaunted private TV channels sound so much like Doordarshan that it is scary. Boforsgate should make us ask more questions. And Prime Minister, please finally open those boxes.

### Do we ask our boys enough — where does it hurt?



THIS MONTH brought the sad news of two boys dying in Ashoka University, according to reports, one them by suicide. The signs of a mental-health crisis among the young have been around for a while but we still don't seem to have understood what is going on or how we can help. I am wary of giving parenting advice because each child is different and like everything else, it is contextual. Parenting today is often a lonely journey because in the last few decades, the burden of child-rearing has been placed solely on parents in the nuclear family. But, raising children has never been just the responsibility of parents. To raise a child is to facilitate a process of knowing the self and building a relationship with the world. This also reguires all of us to think about how we imagine the world and others in our lives.

To speak of my experience of raising a boy requires that I preface it with the privilege of class, of having supportive family close by and friends. This enabled many choices that have contributed to the way he inhabits the world. At 32, I became a mother to a boy with a mixed Hindu-Muslim parentage. This context forced me to ask questions like what would be the child's religion, what cultural legacy would his name draw from, how would the world respond to these choices, etc. Questions like these are ones that we all need to address, but they rarely come up in most families. It may seem easier to unquestioningly follow customs that have been handed down, but my context pushed me to think about these questions more deeply.

When my son was in Class 2, his first name brought him the attention that many Muslim children across the country face a classmate told him that all Muslims were terrorists. This meant that I had to talk to my son about the world, how it is intertwined with the personal, and his and my feelings. It also meant conversations with the school. I don't know if the conversations changed anything, but I know that the two boys continued to talk and play together in school. This is life — contradictory, mixed-up, in-

consistent. Rarely do we acknowledge that to children, rarely do we say to them that we don't have answers and that talking together may be a way to find out.

My parenting journey taught me that one constantly discovers things, both about the child and about oneself that are not always palatable. For all my rejection of autocracy, as a parent I have found myself wanting to say "Because I say so!" and have my will be done. Fortunately, my little boy and others in my life challenged me, forcing me to think about what I wanted and what I was doing. That's a big lesson — that our desires are not always pure and our actions do not always have to ride on them. Recognising our desires does not automatically mean that we act on them but repressing them can certainly lead to twisted behaviour. Can we acknowledge to ourselves that negative emotions do arise in us — when we desire success at something but see someone else get it, or when we develop a crush on someone but they don't reciprocate our feelings? Base feelings can arise in us but they do not have to translate into hurtful behaviour.

To acknowledge the inner self is not just a private act but also requires the need to have someone in our life who asks us — "Where does it hurt?" In a world that is so focussed on how we appear, do we ask little boys this question enough? Boys continue to be told to think of the outside — "boys don't cry", "don't be a sissy". And once they turn into teenagers, that awkward voice-breaking, hair-sprouting, pimples phase gives rise to so much anxiety about finding perfection. But there is no perfect picture, and setting that up for any relationship creates a fertile ground for toxicity.

The teen years were difficult for us too. But the difficult years were also the time to practise our speaking together. We didn't always listen to each other, but we didn't stop. Sometimes we spoke in words, sometimes in hugs, in food — because, of course, talking breaks down in relationships. But I think both of us continue to strive towards it, because we have laid the foundation of speaking about feelings. There are instances when hurt does not go away. I hope that then too this foundation will enable him to reach out to someone who can walk with him as he finds his way of living with it.

Mishra is a documentary film-maker, writer and teacher (How to Raise a Boy is a fortnightly column)



THE RECENTLY released Mrs., directed by Arati Kadav, is causing many meltdowns on social media just for suggesting that the foundation of the Indian family is fundamentally exploitative towards women. The film is a remake of Jeo Baby's *The* Great Indian Kitchen (2021). Centered around a woman who gets married into a family where she is expected to do unending housework, both films make visible the unfair distribution of labour that goes into the running of a household. Both films also share a troubling worldview when it comes to waste and cleaning, reinforcing caste-based ideas of pu-

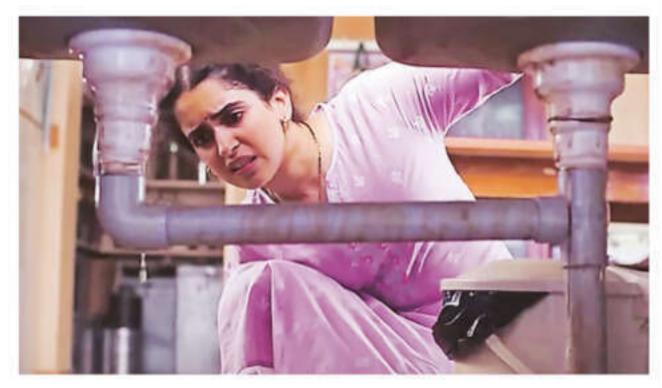
rity and pollution. This makes their

feminism starkly incomplete. Through its sharp editing, the ironically titled The Great Indian Kitchen often contrasts sequences of women working with those of men relaxing. This effectively articulates its point about the gendered distribution of labour. The women of the house, the mother-in-law and the protagonist played by Nimisha Sajayan (named just "wife"), work and work with no end in sight. They are neither respected nor acknowledged in accordance with how integral their labour is to the running of the house. The film makes us uncomfortable because it makes visible what we all otherwise see as normal. The impact is powerful.

*Mrs.* relies more on Sanya Malhotra's expressiveness to convey the unfairness of the situation. One of its beautiful additions to the original plot is a lovely dancing sequence where Malhotra's character Richa tries to make her situation inventive by playing around in the kitchen, only to be interrupted by her father-in-law who views everything she does to make her life easy as a threat to status quo.

At the heart of the films, though, lies a problematic worldview. This can be seen in the difference in how the films view cooking and how they view cleaning. In both films, there is a running sequence of a clogged sink and a leaking drain pipe. This plot point is very important to the film's climax, but the imagery it relies on to evoke our disgust is troubling. Our sympathy towards the protagonist comes from the fact that we do not think she should be the one doing this work. In fact, early on in Mrs., Richa tells her motherin-law that she could leave the kitchen work for the "kaamwali" who will come

### Mrs., TGIK and their incomplete feminism



Sanya Malhotra in *Mrs.* Both the movies rely on the imagery of the drain pipe.

to work in the morning. Would it have been okay if the underpaid domestic worker did this work?

As the film proceeds, smell and touch become important. We watch extended sequences of the upper-caste protagonist unclogging the sink, touching the overflowing dustbin and frantically washing her hands (almost up till her elbows in The Great Indian Kitchen) in order to rid herself of the smell. She is disgusted that she has to touch waste. "I smell of shit," she says at some point. The smell and visuals of garbage haunt her when she is forced to have painful sex with her husband. Beyond the immediacy of plot, cinematic images have a history and life of their own. Washing your hands up till your elbows reminds one of similar practices in upper caste families preoccupied with contamination and "purity". How can this image evoke anything but caste in a caste-based society?

Contrast this with how the films view cooking. Through striking images, both films beautifully demonstrate that there is nothing inherently exploitative about cooking. It can be intricate and a sign of love and care. It becomes a problem only when it is not shared, valued and consented to. What stops us from extending the same perspective to waste? Just like cooking is not inherently exploitative, waste disposal too is not inherently dirty or polluting. Garbage disposal can be made

less burdensome with technological innovation and given dignity by freeing it from a casteist worldview. There is a functional system associated with it and the people who do the work do it with care even though they are neither justly paid nor provided necessary protection. The disposal of waste is essential to production; one cannot work without the other.

Perhaps this is why both films appear confused when they try to comment on the position of the domestic worker who comes to the rescue when the protagonist is menstruating. A brief conversation about how she does not stop working even when she is on her period is in danger of romanticising the domestic worker's exploitation. To be fair, *The Great Indian Kitchen* is courageous enough to make links with the Supreme Court judgment on Sabarimala which broke with tradition by ending the exclusion of women from the temple. And Mrs. acknowledges the presence of caste through dialogue that mentions regressive ideas of "chuachut" (untouchability) followed in the house. Yet, neither film can escape its limited view of caste. A feminism that does not understand the mutually implicating link between labour, caste and gender will always fall short of imagining a truly equal world.

> The writer is a film scholar and critic based in Delhi

# Leave me alone this Women's Day



WITH BARELY two weeks for Women's Day, the pinkwashing has commenced. There are talks, panel discussions and online gigs. A corporate group, which also runs a lab, has offered me a Women's Day special health check-up: TSH and ferritin levels emailed to you at discounted rates; mammogram at half the price. One opens the screen and there are offers raining on make-up, skin care and clothing, from

factories that want us to consume more. The other day, when someone asked me about the most valuable real estate, I said it is the space between one's ears. Head space is the most precious space. It is where one lives. And that is exactly what a woman does not have to herself.

The noise in the head is constant, shrill and annoying. It is programmed to plan ahead, for the next meal, the next meeting, the next crisis that is just around the corner. Many decades ago, in her pathbreaking work, Virginia Woolf argued the case for a room of one's own. I want to argue for a headspace of one's own, transcending the physical four walls.

Have you ever analysed a woman's handbag? It is symbolic of the headspace that is overloaded. A woman's handbag has a lip balm, a sunscreen stick, a pocket perfume and dental floss. A quick snack, wipes, hair grip and safety pins for sure. The load! She has put it all to be well-puttogether. My handbag is symbolic of my head that has no space left.

A man's purse is just plastic and paper-money, membership cards. I find

men (mostly) unbothered about sunscreen or chapped lips. I have male colleagues who walk into the office without a shave. Cool, easy and light.

The load of caregiving and maintenance on Indian women across all levels is tremendously heavy. If it is not the children, then the maintenance of the house, the spouse, the parents. Add to it the pressures of a career, if she has one. And then the pressure to look well put together, which has become a euphemism for not having one wayward eye brow hair ever, not a pleat out of place even if her heart beat is. She should know to apply the right colour corrector, the right cushion covers as per season, and the spread on the table is directly proportionate to her efficiency and knowledge on what spikes glucose and the latest millet on the block.

My friends and I go on girls' trips, but only after stashing food in the refrigerator, filling canisters with healthy snacks and detailed notes on how to and what not to. Even when away, the frequent phone calls and video calls with children/parents/partner amplifies her role as a crisis manager. Multitasking is no longer a compliment, but a ticket to mayhem in the head.

The result of this hyper-alert state of women is the stress load and neuroticism that is the butt of all jokes and memes. If not for desi mom, who would comedians have to roast? The desi mom is now a hashtag that shouts, screams, is sarcastic and one that hits the children. Abusive

epaper.indianexpress.com

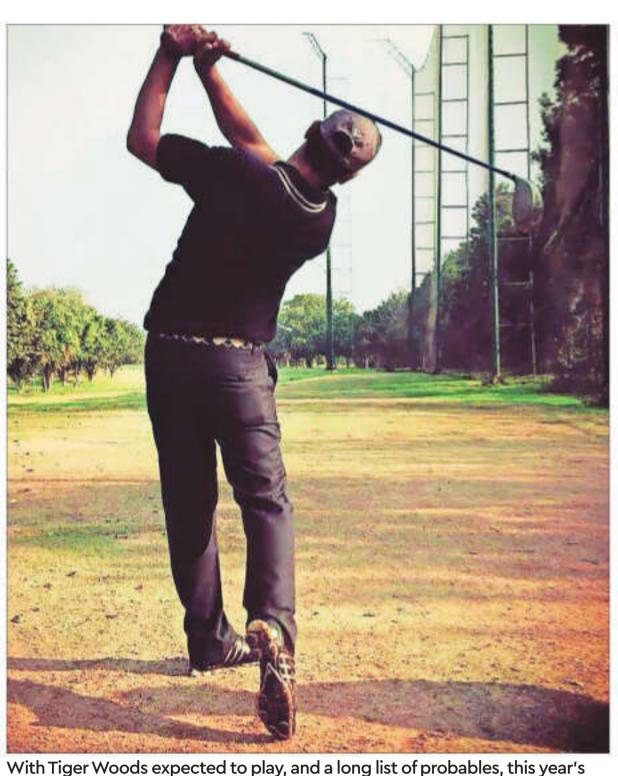
and "mental", most of the time. This Women's Day and on other days, I want to reclaim my head space and out-

grow the demands to manage and maintain, self and others. I want to be left alone, without any unseen load on my frozen shoulders and progress reports on health, hormones and beauty standards. I do not want a discount code to buy that exfoliator that will "polish" my skin, nor on a kitchen appliance that reinforces the role of the women as the primary in-charge of the kitchen.

I want to borrow the words of Virginia Woolf and tell my girls that there is no need to hurry, no need to sparkle, no need to be anyone, but oneself. Women's Day or not.

Susan Thomas is a career bureaucrat, Tedx speaker and a content creator (National Editor Shalini Langer curates the fortnightly 'She Said' column) **FE SUNDAY** WWW.FINANCIALEXPRESS.COM

# SUNDAY, MARCH 2, 2025



Masters Tournament feels primed for drama

### Swing change

The game, like time, doesn't stand still. There's always another story or tournament to rewrite the narrative

Post pandemic, golf got a

makeover from a 'slow and

boring' activity to an

aspirational healthy sport,

a social media trend, and a

mental health tonic

Majors crowned 14 different winners. The sport that had become a one-man

showduring the 2000s began featuring

a global ensemble. Woods wasn't done

yet: the man staged yet another come-

back at the 2018 Tour Championship,

and, finally, that glorious Major win at

came the pandemic. In some parts of the

world, golf's popularity soared, as lock-

downs around the world turned courses

into sanctuaries—open-air and socially

distanced. Post the pandemic, there was

a noticeable surge in the number of

players teeing it up, especially amongst

the younger generation. In some ways

the image of the game got a makeover

from a 'slow and boring' activity to an

aspirational healthy sport, a social

media trend, and a mental health tonic.

professional golf would never be the

same again. Bankrolled by Saudi Arabia'

Public Investment Fund-one of the

largest sovereign wealth funds in the

world-LIV didn't just disrupt the domi-

nance of established tourneys like the

PGA Tour, it exposed deep fault lines

between players and tours' manage-

ments. Phil Mickelson was among the

which was announced in 2023 — is yet to come to fruition. LIV, meanwhile, has

backed the International Series — a sub-

tourney on the Asian Tour— to expand

its global reach. For fans around the

world, all that matters is that the big

events — the Major Championships—

have a full-strength field. That means

in this regard when they sent a special

invitation to Joaquin Niemann to com-

pete in the 2025 Masters. Niemann will

be joined by 12 LIV players at the event

in April this year. The man to beat is the

defending champion who has no inten-

tion of giving up his Green Jacket just as

yet.In 2024,Schefflerarrived at Augusta

with the quiet confidence of a man

whose game—high, towering irons, abil-

ity to control spin on Augusta's glassy

greens, and steady temperament—was

built for Augusta National. Scheffler

left with another Green Jacket, winning

by four shots. With Tiger Woods

expected to play, and a long list of prob-

ables, this year's Masters Tournament

about one sport. The game, like time,

doesn't stand still. There's always

another story, another swing, another

tournament that rewrites the narra-

tive. I'm reminded of a line from *The* 

Legend of Bagger Vance: "Golf is a game

that can't be won, only played." The

same could be said of writing about it.

Meraj Shah is a seasoned

golf writer and video producer

Thank you for letting me play.

Twelve years is a long time to write

feels primed for drama.

The Masters Committee took a step

inclusion of players on the LIV Tour.

first to sign up, and was

soon followed by the

likes of Cameron

Smith, Dustin Johnson,

Bryson DeChambeau,

Brooks Koepka, and

India's Anirban Lahiri,

among others. The

PGA Tour's messy

merger with LIV-the

announcement for

In June 2021, LIV Golfwas launched:

And then, out of nowhere, along

the Masters Tournament in 2019.





**TIME HAS NOTHING** better to do, than elapse. In the summer of 2013, I was driving around Kashmir with only my golf clubs for company. I wrote a swashbuckling, admittedly embellished account of my golfing adventures in Srinagar, Gulmarg and Pahalgam in myvery first column for FE. Looking back, and randomly sifting through the archives of this column (admittedly a self-indulgent exercise) there are more than a few moments—way beyond the scope of this column to recount—here are the ones

that made the highlight reel. When Tiger Woods won the 2013 Players Championship—the biggest of his five PGA Tour victories that year bookies offered excellent odds for the GOAT to add another Major to his tally. Woods' comeback, after his injuryrelated absence from 2009 to 2012, was finally complete when he won the 2013

WGC Bridgestone Invitational and was in the running for the FedEx Cup. But Woods couldn't catch the tall Swede, Henrik Stenson, who won the 2013 Tour Championship and the FedEx Cup with it pocketing \$12.88

million just from the playoffs. Awindfall if you consider that, at the time, Stenson had \$17million in career earnings on the (then) European Tour.

Three years later it was Stenson's turn to go down when he was edged out by Justin Rose on the 72nd hole at golf's historic return to the Olympics. In the annals of golf, 2016 is going to go down as the year of the Olympics. And it was a fitting triumph for Rose, who, selfadmittedly, was fascinated by the prospect of going down in history as the first golfer in the modern era to compete and win in the biggest sporting spectacle in the world. Professional golfers play golf to make a living; it's as simple as that; and that week at the Olympics elevated the game back into the realm of pure sport. For Indians, the 2016 Games will always be synonymous with Aditi Ashok. Merely 18-years-old at the time, Ashok captured the imagination of the country in unprecedented fashion, narrowly missing out on a medal. The Bengaluru girl built on the momentum from the Rio Games towin the gruelling LET Q-school, then the Women's Indian Open and the Qatar Ladies Open in consecutive weeks. Ashok made 207355 Euros in 2016—fuelled by a incredible nine top-ten finishes—and won the rookie of the year award.

No one, including your columnist could have foreseen that Woods would not win again for the next five years. Woods' absence is never good for the game, but the one thing that emerged during that period was the emergence of a depth of field that had been missing in the previous years. By 2018, 14



The Three Language Formula (TLF) is not enforced in the Hindi-speaking states but sought to be enforced in the non-Hindi speaking states. It is a matter of record that government schools in Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Haryana follow effectively a one-language policy of only Hindi

**UNPROVOKED WARS ARE** not intended to achieve a lofty goal but to advance a partisan ideology. BJP has a penchant for starting unprovoked wars. The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the Uniform Civil Code (UCC) are examples. They were not designed to fulfill any felt necessity. Both CAA and UCC were pushed by the RSS-BJP to create discord among Hindu non-Hindu communities.

The central government has blown the bugle of another unprovoked war, this time on language. The so-called 'three language formula'(TLF) was first mooted by the Radhakrishnan Committee. It was dead-onarrival. No state has ever implemented TLF.

TLF not a priority

There were many reasons. The first priority was naturally given to building schools and appointing teachers. The second was universal enrollment and keeping the children in school. Next was to improve the quality of teaching — not only of languages but of other equally important subjects like mathematics, science, history, geography and social studies. Those tasks are incomplete after 78 years of independence.

Language became an explosive issue not because of 'education' but because of Article 343 of the Constitution. It declared that Hindi shall be the official language of the Union but English shall continue to be used for a period of 15 years. The fifteen years ended in 1965. An unthinking government declared that, with effect from

January 26, 1965, Hindi would be the sole official language. The reaction was immediate and spontaneous. Tamil Nadu erupted, and a Dravidian party rose to power. Jawaharlal Nehru had made a promise that English will continue as Associate Official Language as long as the non-Hindi speaking people wanted it. At the height of the 1965 crisis, Indira Gandhi alone had the courage and the wisdom to

administration obliged the central government to be bilingual. Hindi, like other Indian languages, was not versatile enough to cope with the demands of science, law, economics, engineering, foreign trade, foreign relations, international bodies, etc. State governments are bilingual too and depend on English for passing legislation and many aspects of administration. Meantime, there have been three developments with farreaching consequences. One, in 1975, 'Education'was transferred from the State List to the Concurrent List eroding the autonomy of the states as far as school education is concerned. Two, India embraced liberalisation and globalisation in 1991 and, inevitably, English. Three, there was a demand from parents for English medium schools, and it is growing.

Which is third language?

The present conflict is over aspects of the New Education Policy (2020) and, in particular, TLF. The regional/state language is the 'first' language in schools, English is the 'second' language, but which is the 'third'language?

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regional/state language is the 'first' language in schools, English is the 'second' language, but which is the 'third'

The Union Education Minister has a glibargument. The NEP is a national policy and every state is Constitutionally obliged to adopt the policy. Further, while NEP mandates the teaching of a third language, it does not *stipulate* that the third language must be Hindi. Mr Dharmendra Pradhan feigned innocence when he asked, why is the government of Tamil Nadu opposed to the NEP and the teaching of a third language?

The answers are simple: (1) NEP is the policy of the current central government and *not* mandated by the Constitution and (2) the official policy of successive governments in Tamil Nadu has been that two languages — not three — will be taught in *gov*ernment schools. The TN government has put no impediment to *private* schools offering Hindi as a subject. Kendriya Vidyalaya schools and schools in Tamil Nadu affiliated to CBSE (642), ICSE (77) and IB (8) offer Hindi, and thousands of children learn Hindi. The government also does not stand in the way of lakhs of children learning Hindi through the Dakshin Bharat Hindi Prachar Sabha or similar organisations.

One language in many states

As far as NEP is concerned, NEP has both good features and unacceptable features. One of the controversial features is TLF.TLF is *not* enforced in the Hindi-speaking states but sought to be *enforced* in the non-Hindi speaking states. It is a matter of record that

Uttarakhand, Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Haryana follow effectively a one-language policy of only Hindi. Most children enrolled in government schools in these states learn no other language because there are few English teachers and hardly a teacher of any other language. Private schools are happy to follow government schools and teach Hindi; many also teach English but not a third language. In the few schools that offer a third language, it is invariably Sanskrit. In states like Punjab, Gujarat and Maharashtra, the third language is Hindi, but it is well known that Punjabi, Gujarati and Marathi have a close kinship with Hindi.

government schools in Uttar Pradesh,

**EXPRESS PHOTO** 

Besides, the quality of English taught is appallingly poor. Children studying in government schools where English is taught hardly speak English outside the English classroom. This is true for all states, Tamil Nadu included. Before the Minister of Education bullies Tamil Nadu into accepting TLF — really Hindi as the third language — he should make a success of teaching two languages (the regional language and English) all over India. Spoken English is scarce; good spoken English is rare.

Government has failed to teach English, the agreed second language; why does the government have ambitions to *succeed* in teaching a third language?



Website: pchidambaram.in X: @Pchidambaram\_IN



# Starting an unprovoked war

language?

defy the zealots and repeat the promise. More than the promise, the exigencies of

book about India's political culture that I have read in a long time. It is called 'Boforsgate' and has been written by Chitra Subramaniam without whose outstanding investigative journalism the truth about the bribes that Bofors paid to sell their howitzers to the Indian army may never have come out. Chitra risked her life, her marriage and her sanity in pursuit of the truth. But this is not just her story. It is the story of the ugly underworld below the surface of politics in Delhi. An underworld where criminals, corrupt politicians and compliant officials thrive.

began when Rajiv Gandhi was prime minister, so I remember well the events and cast of characters that Chitra describes in her book. Immediately after Swedish state radio announced in April 1987 that Bofors had bribed Indian politicians and high officials to win Sweden's biggest arms export deal the sordid plot to erase the money trail began. In the circles in which I moved everyone knew that Ottavio Quattrocchi and his wife, Maria, were the best friends of Rajiv and Sonia Gandhi.

Everyone knew that when Indira Gandhi was prime minister this fertiliser salesman had an extraordinary

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### The ghost of Bofors returns

ability to win contracts for Snamprogettiwhere he then worked. We also knew that Sonia's parents stayed in the Quattrocchi family home when they came to India. After Rajiv became prime minister, Quattrocchi was often heard telling people in Delhi's drawing rooms that if they needed something from the government, he could be helpful. Then when it was revealed, in July 1999, that two of the secret bank accounts in which Bofors' bribe money was traced belonged to him and his wife, he fled India never to return. It is worth remembering that almost the last thing Dr Manmohan Singh did before the 2009 general election was to unfreeze a bank account that belonged to him in London and had been frozen by the Government of India.

The reason why 'Boforsgate' is such an important book is because corruption is still India's biggest political problem. It is to make money and not out of a desire to serve this country that most people come into politics today. Politics is the easiest way to make big money in our ancient land. This is why political leaders ensure that their constituencies pass onto their children. I have closely observed how these political heirs almost magically make enough money to be able to buy properties in foreign lands, stay in expensive hotels and send

their progeny to fancy foreign schools. This new political culture began with Bofors. It was the first time that a close associate of the Prime Minister was caught in an act of bribery endangering national security. Rajiv Gandhi denied in Parliament that he or any member of his family had taken Bofors bribes, but ordinary Indians did not believe him and one big reason why he lost the election in 1989 was Bofors. Once the campaign began, I remember having conversations about Bofors in tea shops in tiny villages. The outrage was huge, and rural musicians sang songs about how India could not be governed by 'Italy's son-in-law'.

After Atal Bihari Vajpayee became prime minister, I once ran into Arun Jaitley on a flight to Malaysia and he said that he was on his way to get Quattrocchi. This never happened because for some reason Vajpayee lost interest in pursuing the case and for some reason Narendra Modi who became prime minister with the promise to end corruption has lost interest as well. To quote Chitra, "Since 1997, India has had the documents of the Bofors case from Switzerland. Names of recipients, percentages of commission, instruction to the banks and much more that would help a genuine investigation to move ahead remain in boxes with the CBI."Why?

Could it be because Modi knows that although no corruption charges can be pinned on him personally, there

are BJP chief ministers and ministers in his government who are having a merry old time making money? Could it be that when it comes to looting Mother India there exists a bipartisan consensus among politicians and high officials? It certainly seems that way. As for us 'watchdogs' in the media, we know that journalists can be jailed and sometimes killed for exposing even the smallest little scandal. Remember that journalist in Uttar Pradesh who spent six months in jail for exposing corruption in a Mirzapur school mid-

day meal scheme? Chitra is without question India's finest investigative reporter but when I finished reading 'Boforsgate', I found myself wondering if she would have still been alive if she lived in India and not Switzerland. There are those who say that the media has only come under pressure since Modi became prime minister. They are wrong. When I tried to investigate if there was a larger conspiracy behind the assassination of Indira Gandhi, I was hauled up before the commission investigating her death and asked many questions about 'my Pakistani connections'. I immediately stopped asking questions.

What has changed since Modi became prime minister is that he is so allergic to criticism that almost the whole media has been 'managed'. Our vaunted private TV channels sound so much like Doordarshan that it is scary. Boforsgate should make us ask more questions. And Prime Minister, please finally open those boxes.

**LAST WEEK I** read the most important

My journey as a political columnist

Bahadur Shah Zafar Marg, New Delhi-110002. Phone: 0120-6651500. (Cover price: Patna: ₹12,; Raipur: ₹12, Srinagar ₹15). Chairman of the Board: Viveck Goenka, Editor: Shyamal Majumdar, Editor (Delhi): Shobhana Subramanian\* (\*Responsible for selection of News under the PRB Act) ©Copyright: The Indian Express (P) Ltd All rights reserved. Reproduction in any manner, electronic or otherwise, in whole or in part, without prior written permission is prohibited. The Financial Express® financialexp.epapr.in New Delhi

### PEACE FALLS TO PIECES AS TRUMP & ZELENSKYY SPAR

N February 2022, at the start of the war in Ukraine, the Biden administration offered to evacuate Volodymyr Zelenskyy. The Ukrainian president tweeted, "The fight is here. I need ammunition, not a ride." This week, the third anniversary of the war, Zelenskyy was in Washington to pursue a peace deal pitched by the Trump administration. In one of the ugliest slugfests ever streamed live across the world, Zelenskyy was virtually told by Donald J Trump to take a hike.

Context is critical for comprehension. Trump had declared during his campaign that he would end the war in 24 hours. Trump and his MAGA base have clearly been up in arms against the flow of funds to Ukraine. For the self-confessed master of *The Art of the Deal*, the power equation is spelt by the what's-in-it-for-us question. The answer his team came up with: a chunk of the rare earth minerals buried under Ukraine.

The minerals-for-peace optics has salience for the MAGA base. The US has provided an array of weaponry and spent billions— Trump says it's \$350 billion, while a report to the US Con-



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

gress puts it at \$182 billion. Trump's peace deal presents access to critical minerals as a payback for support lithium for renewable energy, titanium for aerospace and military, graphite for nuclear reactors, and rare earths for electronics. It's also presented as a counter to China's dominance on rare minerals.

Trump believes he can make Vladimir Putin an offer he can't refuse. The orchestration began with a call between Trump and Putin, followed by the choreographed ushering in of Zelenskyy by his European supporters. The incentive

for peace goes beyond the human cost. A ceasefire followed by peace would help the European economy too. It would allow the European Central Bank to cut rates, bring down energy prices and provide opportunities in the reconstruction of Ukraine.

Tactics and strategy are vital to success. The consensus view across the world is to make Trump's ego your ally. In recent weeks, French President Emanuel Macron and UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer did this well. It's what Trump whisperers call massaging of narcissism for preferred outcomes. Even within his cabinet, there is a race to be pointedly agreeable with Trump. It's inconceivable that the European leaders would not have prepped Zelenskyy on this critical skill.

The Friday event followed the script for the first half hour—the interaction was a blend of nodding agreeability, consternation about pronouncements and perseverance on both sides. Zelenskyy and Trump seemed to be singing a tune from the same page. Around 30 minutes into the presser, Zelenskyy made what tennis players call 'unforced errors', unleashing a tirade of egos.

Zelenskyy fact-checked Trump and annotated details that typically are not mentioned in public in diplomacy. To make his point, he reeled out ceasefire violations by Putin since 2014 and in 2019 when Trump was president. The golden rule of power talks is to never engage with subordinates while meeting the boss. Zelenskyy entered into an argument with US Vice President JD Vance on his interpretations. "What kind of diplomacy, JD, are you asking about?" asked Zelenskyy.

This triggered a tongue-lashing first by Vance and then by Trump, who simply ended the session with a terse "All right, I think we've seen enough." Then, characteristically, the star of *The* Apprentice added, "This is going to be great television, I will say that." The ignominy was stark. Team Trump met in the Oval Office as Zelenskyy waited. Secretary of State Marco Rubio and National Security Advisor Mike Waltz stepped out and simply asked

Zelenskyy to leave. The deal and the lunch stood cancelled. This is not the first time a head of state has disagreed with a sitting US president. Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney and US President Ronald Regan disagreed on issues and debated 'acid rain'. Indeed, Reagan went on to compliment Mulroney for deploying the adage "we can disagree without being disagreeable". President George W Bush and the German Chancellor got along despite disagreements on the Iraq war and the use of Guantanamo Bay as a prison.

The primary caveat in diplomacy is: what you don't say or how you present disagreement is fundamental for success. During the meeting with King Abdullah II of Jordan, Trump doubled down on his idea of an eastern riviera around Gaza, claiming Egypt and Jordan would offer land parcels. Even as Trump went on, displaying practiced poise, the king of Jordan said a meeting was scheduled in Saudi Arabia and added, "Let us wait for the Egyptians... and not get ahead of ourselves."

The true test of diplomacy rests in managing expectations. The European sponsors of the peace deal wanted Zelenskyy to work with the script, sign a memorandum, bag a ceasefire and buy time for negotiations. That was not to be. Zelenskyy, given the existential battle, insisted on an explicit guarantee where European peace-keeping would have a US backstop. Trump has argued that the minerals deal was an implicit guarantee that would deter Putin.

What transpired in the Oval Office will inform and influence leaders in Europe, Japan, Korea, India and China. More importantly, it will define the trajectory of ongoing tariff negotiations. Historically, the powerful tend to dictate the terms of gratitude. However, the powerful are also dependent, and it is useful in geopolitics to get entrenched and leverage dependence.

### SURGE OF BHARATIYATA UNITY AT PRAYAGRAJ



POWER & POLITICS **PRABHU CHAWLA** prabhuchawla@newindianexpress.com

Follow him on X @PrabhuChawla

YTH is the foundation of faith. For 45 days that ended last week, Prayagraj was the epicentre of faith, redemption and cultural unity. Over 66 crore Hindus from across the country and outside converged on the sandy shores of the spiritual city for a holy dip and to celebrate Hinduism's sa-

cred spirit during Maha Kumbh 2025.

There were a few calamities and controversies, media malice and marketing mania that were drowned in the ancient tides in which demons had perished from the wrath of gods. The drops of *amrit* or nectar that had fallen on the sacred sands in another age made this year's Maha Kumbh Bharat's 'Azadi ka amrit kaal'—a festival of Hindus, for Hindus and by Hindus that symbolised cultural nationhood.

The spectacle was the world's largest confluence of people at one spot, gathering to assert their cultural compatibility, belief and fellowship of purpose—4,000-odd castes, over 100 sects and thousands of sub-castes. If the president, vice president, prime minister and scores of Union ministers and chief ministers landed at Prayagraj to cent kamdhenu. The state and the Cenexpress their allegiance to a centuriesold tradition, so did crores of ordinary workers and volunteers from various political parties. Over 15 lakh kalpvasi devotees stayed for the entire duration on the river banks, engaging in prayer, penance and discourses.

The Maha Kumbh, which comes around once every 144 years, is rooted in Hindu mythology and determined by celestial alignments. It showcases a remarkable fusion of faith, politics and economic might, while exposing faultlines in India's socio-political landscape. The 66 crore pilgrims—a number that's double US's population—enhanced Bharat's global stature.

The 12-year cycle for a *purna* or full Kumbh rotates among four sites—Prayagraj (Allahabad), Haridwar, Nashik and Ujjain—based on astrological combinations. Its religious significance lies in the promise of *moksha* or emancipation from the cycle of rebirths through ritual baths at auspicious moments.

With significance stretching beyond the 12-year cycle, the 2025 event represented an Indian cultural renaissance. Yet, the sideshow was partisan political messaging. The festival was an advertisement for the aggrandisement of identity, a congregation of individuals

who wished to be conspicuous by their presence and association with Sanatan Dharma. The rich and famous from the worlds of cinema, art and business competed in the Olympics of Religion by posting their pictures on social media.

For the Sangh parivar, the mela's massive attendance reflected the popular mandate for its aggressive promotion of

Hindutva and reassertion of the Hindu way of life's dominance. The BJP and its allies boasted about the 'seamless' execution of the project. Due credit was given to Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath.

The Maha Kumbh became a munifitre invested a whopping ₹7,000-plus crore in infrastructure spread over 4,000 hectares, 12 km of ghats, 360 special trains, and AI-driven surveillance. The UP government claimed that the state got additional revenue of over ₹2 lakh crore. Local businesses like vendors to transport operators thrived. Tourism surged with international pilgrims arriving to save their souls. Thousands of satellites circling the planet captured the enormity of the event from above and astonished

Western liberals who had written obituary of Sanatan unity.

There were political controversies too. Many opposition leaders were either absent or highly critical of Yogi's arrangements. Akhilesh Yadav took a jab, calling Adityanath "Ravan" for overhyping attendance figures. Mamata Banerjee's "mrityu Kumbh" remark after the stampede drew the ire of the BJP, which accused the INDIA bloc of mocking Hinduism. Congress leaders, including Rahul Gandhi, abstained from getting their feet wet, reflecting a strategic retreat from overt religious symbolism in a polarised electoral landscape. The Kumbh became a litmus test for political positioning ahead of future elections. It also created yet another ex-

> tremely profitable business venture in the form of cultural, spiritual and religious tourism.

The Kumbh mela stretches back millenniums. It's rooted in mythology, has been shaped by history and influenced by various ruling powers, including the British during their 200-year colonial rule. Its scale, economic potential and the occasional

violence, particularly among armed ascetic groups, exasperated British administrators. An early documented British encounter with the Kumbh mela occurred in 1796, when Captain Thomas Hardwicke reported a violent clash in Haridwar that claimed 500 lives, prompting the deployment of a British unit armed with cannons to restore order.

By the early 19th century, the colonisers saw in the mela both a challenge and an opportunity. As British control solidified after the 1857 Indian Rebellion, the festival's management became formalised. The revolt marked a turning point—the Prayagwal Brahmin priests, who depended on pilgrimage revenues, had supported the uprising and were persecuted by the British. Allahabad became a key centre of conflict.

The 1858 Kumbh mela was not held due to such disturbances. There was no explicit ban, but gathering became practically impossible amid the unrest and subsequent crackdown. Any large assembly of Indians was viewed with suspicion as a potential source of further dissent.

At the first Kumbh under direct British supervision in 1870, the Raj had introduced a pilgrim tax to maximise its economic potential. It initially generated substantial revenue, but eventually faced resistance. During the 20th century, the Kumbh became an arena of anticolonial sentiment. During the Second World War, in 1942, the British government banned the sale of railway tickets to Allahabad for the Kumbh due to rumours of possible Japanese bombing. This effectively curtailed attendance.

After India's gained independence, state governments assumed responsibility for organising the fairs. The 1954 Allahabad Kumbh, the first major postindependence event, saw a tragic stampede killing over 800 people despite employing modern crowd management techniques inspired by the colonial framework. Later Kumbhs improved on the framework. Today's Kumbh melas such as the 2013 event with 12 crore attendees, or the 2025 one which attracted more than six times the number—reflect a blend of traditional spirituality and modern logistics. It's an art mastered by the Yogi government.

For Bharatiyas, the Kumbh mela is the pinnacle of spirituality. It's also a cultural canvas to showcase Bharat's heritage through processions, discourses and interactions with venerated masters. After the construction of the Ram temple in Ayodhya and redevelopment of Varanasi, the successful conclusion of the 2025 Maha Kumbh has bridged the ancient and the modern as a living symbol of nation's cultural homogeneity.

The Saraswati, which is the third confluent river at Prayagraj, is a mythical or subterranean river. This time, it's as if it rose up, called forth by the energy of a resurgent Bharat as Hinduism's mantra of political and popular purity. It blessed the converging ideas of ancient and contemporary India on a sacred and sentient shore.

### PUTTING THE ARTIFICIAL IN THE ORGANIC



**OPINION NAMRATA JOSHI** Consulting Editor Follow her on X @Namrata\_Joshi



HEAD of the 97th Academy Awards later today, it appears that the ABC of the ceremony will be Anora, The Brutalist and Conclave, despite their brief brushes with controversy over the lack of intimacy coor-

and a jaundiced portrayal of the Catholic church, respectively. Brady Corbet's period epic *The Bru-*

dinators, use of artificial intelligence

talist, about Hungarian architect and holocaust survivor László Tóth (Adrien Brody) who emmigrated to the US, has bagged 10 nominations. The praise for its ambition and sweep, technical finesse and emotional resonance notwithstanding, it got mired in a fracas around one of cinema's biggest bugbears—AI.

In January this year, the film's editor Dávid Jancsó disclosed in an interview that AI voice-generating technology was used to correct the accents of Brady and Felicity Jones, who plays journalist Erzsébet Tóth, the architect's wife.

Following widespread criticism and questioning of the authenticity of Brody and Jones's acts, Corbet had to issue a statement underlining that their performances were completely their own. "They worked for months with dialect coach Tanera Marshall to perfect their accents. Innovative Respeecher technology was used in Hungarian language dialogue editing only, specifically to refine certain vowels and letters for accuracy. No English was changed."

Meanwhile, AI's knocks grew louder on Indian cinema's door last December with a Chandigarh-based startup, Intelliflicks Studios, announcing it would create a feature film with generative AI. Based on the 2014 novel Maharaja in Denims, the film would be about a young man who thinks he is a reincarnation of Ranjit Singh. Earlier in 2024, an AI-generated avatar of actor Uttam Kumar was seen in the Bengali film *Oti Uttam*.

These developments have brought to fore the ever-evolving debate on the use of AI in cinema. More so in light of the fact that it can't be wished away. How to then negotiate the man-machine and technology-creativity polarities? How can something that has 'artificial' coded in its name approximate the organic? In light of the inconsistencies and limitations of technology, can the audiovisuals generated by AI entirely replace live action? How much of AI is too much and where should one draw the line?

Jancsó called for addressing the elephant in the room. "It is controversial in the industry to talk about AI, but it

shouldn't be... We should be having a n open discussion about what tools AI can provide us with," he said, nodding towards saving on time, money and effort.

Back in 2023, AI had been a major issue in the historic Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists and Writers Guild of America double-strike in Hollywood with new contracts formulated to ensure protection from AI, underlining it as a tool than a replacement for humans.



As some recent Indian projects and an Oscar favourite show, artificial intelligence in cinema is here to stay—both as enabling technology and plot theme. The question then is how to negotiate the man-machine and technology-creativity polarities

Last year, veteran screenwriter and executive committee member of the Screenwriters' Association, Anjum Rajabali, told me that AI would not just be a threat to jobs, but it would change the definition of a story, approach to writing and the culture of viewership. "It's a whole relationship of human empathy where the plot logic is there to carry [forward] the human experience," he said. While the plot logic can be fed into AI, human experience can't. "AI won't write Manto, though it might write a Manto plot," Rajabali said.

All this makes AI look like perfect fodder for a film. Yet, Indian films about AI have been few and far between. Many have remained in the realm of robotics, like last year's Teri Baaton Mein Aisa Ul*jha Jiya*; there were also the Malayalam film *Monica: An AI Story* and the appcentred *IRaH*. An interesting departure was the Netflix thriller *CTRL*, which looked at the dangers of manipulating individual lives through AI.

But the most fascinating so far has been Aranya Sahay's indie film *Humans in the Loop*. Set in the world of data-labelling in a remote corner of Jharkhand running on the strength of Adivasi women, it doesn't just take viewers behind the scenes to the processes shaping AI, but also places them in a parental, familial and societal context.

Nehma (Sonal Madhushankar) returns to her village after divorce with her two kids to work as a data labeller. While she tries to mend her strained relationship with her daughter Dhaanu (Ridhima Singh), she has to properly process raw data to help AI differentiate between basic things like ginger and turmeric, a good worm and a pest, and an Indian tribal woman from an American Indian. She realises that moulding and harnessing AI is similar to bringing up a child. Both demand immense perseverance, accountability and responsibility towards the larger good of humanity. In other words, a film that gives a compelling human face to technology.

#### QUOTE CORNER

A whole lot of people are going to be really hurt by what is happening, what is coming our way. And even if they're of a different political persuasion, we need to call upon our empathy and not judge, but listen from our hearts and welcome them into our tent because we are going to need a big tent to resist successfully what's coming at us.

Jane Fonda, 87, on Trump 2.0 while receiving a Screen Actors Guild award

We like competition, but it's not fair to pit a team of 11 players against a team of 22 who can catch the ball with their hands.

**Florent Menegaux,** Michelin CEO, explaining why he is laying off workers

Israel has been pretty consistent if you look at what they've been saying and doing. They intend to go to more war, not to phase two.

**Mohamad Elmasry**, political analyst at the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies, on the agreed phases of the West Asia ceasefire

#### MAILDAC WERESCO MAILBAU letters@newindianexpress.com

#### **Constructive opposition**

Ref: Change pitch to sing in unison for Kerala (Mar 1). The article should be an eye-opener for political parties across the country. Once elections are over, the losing party must sit down with the winner to participate in state-building. Through such supportive acts, parties can regain their ground. Wisdom lies in cooperation, not confrontation.

Prahlad Chebbi, Dharwad

#### **Benign Belgamites**

Ref: Focus on shared history to defuse Belagavi clash (Mar 1). Belagavi is a cosmopolitan city with a salubrious climate. People there speak Kannada. Marathi, Konkani and English, with Hindi as a link language. Invitations to temple festivals are printed in both Marathi and Kannada. Belgamites are benign and peace-loving. Problems arise only when politicians and language bigots step in.

G Nataraja Perumal, Elathur

#### Changing heroes

Ref: Renaming spree: Full politics, little history (Mar 1). Pratik Kanjilal's articles are always welcome. His motto seems to be information, education and entertainment. As rulers change, so do the regime's heroes. This applies to renaming places too. As long as older generations are around, old names continue to be in circulation. But how did the streets and flyovers named after Mahabharata characters escape the ever-observant author? J Bhagyalakshmi, email

#### Fight house

The unprecedented shouting match between two world leaders in the White House turned an official meeting between two heads of state into an oncamera show. With the arrival of Trump, there seems little scope for closed-door negotiations. Both leaders seemed interested in showing their own constituencies how hard they were working to secure their respective interests. Shall we call it television diplomacy?

D V G Sankara Rao, Vizianagaram

#### **ASHA** protests

Sub: More ASHA workers join as protest enters 19th day (Mar 1). The Kerala government is pretending not to see the ASHA workers' protest. The demands from these health workers are legitimate and reasonable. The issue will go out of hand as more workers are joining in, making it more difficult for the government to handle things as time passes. S Lakshmi, Hyderabad

#### Anti-drug combine

Ref: Thiruvananthapuram police trap 140 drug abusers (Mar 1). The use of synthetic psychotropic stimulants such as MDMA is difficult to detect through behaviour. Unless there is a combined effort from law enforcement agencies—with support from parents, teachers, friends, health experts and society as a whole—the menace shall continue. Biju C Mathew, Thonnakkal

#### Dysfunctional family

Sub: Afan's father returns from Dammam to land of losses (Mar 1). The deep disconnect between alleged killer Afan's father and his family on financial matters is common in most Kerala families. Simple living must be the first lesson of the saga for all. K R Parvathy, Mysuru

#### Tharoor's charm

Ref: Shashi Tharoor a crowd-puller, says Thangal; MP endorses Sudhakaran (Feb 27). Shashi Tharoor's strong personality has bittersweet charm. If his individual brilliance isn't balanced by strong teamwork, it could create internal divisions. His presence is both an asset and a challenge, reminding that success comes when personal charm benefits all. Amritavarshini S, Kollam

#### Tamil talk

We Tamilians are like this only. We are proud of our mastery over English and will not learn Hindi. When we go north, we will insist that the locals speak the oldest language in the world, Tamil. Sometimes, as a concession to ill-informed northerners, we will speak in English. It's just about messing things up. Ramani Jayanthy, Chennai

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# REFLECTIONS

# At Corbett park, once more



TOUCHSTONES IRA PANDE

E have recently returned from a reviving break at the Corbett National Park. This natural sanctuary and wildlife park is one of the earliest of its kind. and a favourite retreat for us Kumaonis. One of the major reasons for this is that it is named after a person who was worshipped all over the Terai and Kumaon as 'Carpet Saa'b'. Jim Corbett, to give him his proper name, was born and brought up in India and was passionately fond of forests and animals. Initially a game hunter who hunted tigers and leopards for sport (like several others of that time), later, he became a fierce protector of the tiger and its cousins (called bagh all over this area) and lived happily amongst leopards and panthers. His sister Maggie and faithful dog, Robin, followed him wherever he went and his jungle tales make for fascinating reading no matter how many times you may have read them.

Corbett's home in Nainital, Guerney House, was close to where we lived in Ayarpata, a thickly-wooded part of Nainital where many old zamindar and taluqdar families had cottages and homes to escape the heat and sultry monsoons of the plains. The Terai was also where many refugee families from West Punjab were allotted farms to compensate for the lands they had left behind. In the 1950s and 1960s, the Terai was a marshy, unhealthy tract full of tigers, snakes and killer malarial mosquitoes. This is why many chose to send their

families and children to the cooler hills just hours away and study at the public schools Nainital was famous for:

This long introduction is because when I went to the lovely resort we stayed in this time, I was delighted to meet the person who runs it as he turned out to be the grandson of someone we knew as the Raja of Pilibhit. I remember Pilibhit House, where his grandparents lived in (now run as a posh hotel), and one of his aunts was in school with me. There is something about the Kumaon hills that compels you to come back over and over again. Each time I go, I get the feeling of returning to my mother's womb. In fact, I can name the exact spot where this happens. Chatting with the owner of this delightful Riverview Retreat, I felt I had met a soulmate because he spends most of his time here while running his huge chain of hotels and resorts.

#### Credit for raising awareness in our natural world must be given to the British

The Corbett Park is strictly guarded and only the old Forest Department dak bungalow (named Dhikala) is inside the park. Naturally, you need serious sarkari connections to be able to stay there, so a number of resorts have sprung up all the way from Ramnagar to the forest limit of the Corbett National Park. Spread over 2,800 sq km and divided into six zones, you have to be very lucky to spot a tiger. On the first day of our morning safari, I'm afraid, all the tiger had left for curious visitors was a lump of shit to let us know what he thought of idiots like us. Sadly, elephant safaris are not allowed any longer, so we were stuffed into an open jeep that

made such a racket that only monkeys and langoors stayed on to see what fools announce their entry so noisily. However, on our next safari, in another zone, we finally managed a tiger sighting and all the noisy chatter from other jeeps with cranky kids and chattering adults came to a halt. The magnificent king of the jungle is the lord of all he surveys and we could only gape at the confidence of his royal gait as he walked across the savannah grass.

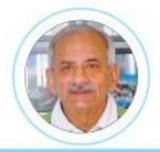
Believe me, a visit to a natural wildlife park is what all parents of young children must make. Quite apart from the serenity and silence of the forest is the feeling that Man is the lowest form of life on earth. Watching a tiger in a zoo will never show you the magnificent camouflage the savannah grass and stripes provide this regal animal. It takes the trained eye of a guide to spot pugmarks and observe the claw marks on a tree trunk to calculate when a tiger last passed that route. The alarm system set in motion by the parakeets, the barking deer and the chattering monkeys warns the deer that they are being stalked. I am sad that our schoolchildren are rarely taken on expeditions to familiarise them with the flora and fauna of the country. Discovery Channel or Animal Planet can never replace the thrill of actually being able to hear, see and experience the beauty of the Indian jungle.

A museum has been created by the Forest Department where, apart from the stuffed animals, simulated sounds of rain and thunder are played in a dark room for visitors to demonstrate how frightening the sound of thunder and the crack of lightning can be when you are in a forest at night. The stygian darkness of a stormy night or the eerie feeling that you are being watched can send shivers down the spine.

Credit for raising awareness in our natural world must be given to the British, who were intrepid walkers and left a valuable legacy of records. Today, our Forest Department officers ensure that this legacy is preserved.

The writer is a social commentator

# Repositioning God as a marketable product



AVAY SHUKLA

ARX missed the full picture when he described religion as an opiate of the masses. So did George Carlin when he claimed that God was fiction. For, today, neo-capitalism and right-wing fundamentalism have assigned God a new role and turned Him into an FMCG (Fast Moving Consumer Good): far from being an opiate, He is now a stimulant for consumption on a gigantic scale, the driver for GDP and GST growth. If, along the Laffer curve, a few consumers die in a stampede or fire, that is acceptable collateral damage, a tax write-off where the public picks up the bill while the high priests of Mammon go chuckling to the bank. The Maha Kumbh, which the UP government claims will add ₹2 lakh crore to the state's GDP, is the apotheosis of this new divine role.

Hindu religion being one of the main pillars of the BJP's very existence and power play, it has to be constantly glorified, burnished and made larger than life. As Yuval Noah Harari asserts, areligion is not just its deities but also the social functions it performs. The BJP's aim is to ensure that one of these 'social functions' is legitimising and consolidating its power and narrow worldview. Given these high stakes, Hinduism can no longer be left to the tender mercies of the Shankaracharuas, Mahamandeleshwars, priests, purchits or the humble devotee and pilgrim in the villages. It must be omamentalised, over-hyped and aggrandised, made a TV spectacle, a platform for projecting the party and the PM as its prime custodian.

This is a continuation of a medieval mindset we thought the modern world had left behind: did not the emperors and kings of that time build cathedrals, pyramids, gigantic statues, temples and monuments to perpetuate their own myths, dogmas and personalities, to remain in the public eye and memory? Were kings and pharaohs not considered embodiments of the divine power? Religion may be fiction, so it has to be dressed up, for the grander the fiction, the easier it is to get the public to swallow it.

It is in this backdrop that we must understand this government's hostile takeover of religion, and its obsession with the Disneyfication of our religious places and the conversion of all major Hindu festivals into a Cecil DeMille type of Hollywood productions. A few recent instances will help to establish this point:

The inauguration of the new Parliament building on May 28, 2023, was done with the splendour of a Roman coronation, complete with the Sengol substituting for a sceptre and a procession of high priests. A secular political function was transformed into a religious one.

■The consecration of the Ram temple in Ayodhya, built at a reported cost of ₹1,800 crore, was an even grander event, the tempo having been built up for weeks before, like some gladiatorial show at the Colosseum. ■ The Kashi Vishwanath corridor, which will cost ₹800 crore when all its phases are complete, was hyped up as the rebirth of Varanasi, another reaffirmation of a resurgent Hinduism; the destruction of hundreds of houses and private temples to make way for the corridors was, of course, acceptable collateral damage.

The Char Dham Highway, ripping through the heart of the Himalayas and built against all environmental considerations, is again an emblem of religious revivalism, even though it is rationalised on strategic defence grounds. It will cost about ₹12,000 crore.

■A dedicated and wholly unnecessary highway is being built for the Kanwariyas in UP at a cost of ₹650 crore and a reported 33,000 trees, once again to project religion in a larger-than-life format and to milk religious sentiments.

The exaggerated claims of the Maha Kumbh, its deafening publicity and 24x7 media coverage, the Guinness scale of infrastructure created at a reported cost of ₹7,000 crore (and ₹5,000 crore by the Railways) is again meant to amplify the same message.

It's the same with festivals. The Kumbh has been celebrated since time immemorial, but the frenzy this year

#### The spiritual and ascetic in Hinduism has been replaced with the commercial and extravagant

was unprecedented, with even Blinkit home-delivering sangam water, dips being offered online, and someone else taking a dip on your behalf for a nominal charge! I have lived in Delhi for 50 years, but have never witnessed occasions like Ganesh Chaturthi, Chhat Pujaor Kanwariya yatras being magnified to the kind of spectacles we witness nowadays. This resurgence of a placid faith is clearly contrived, funded and Disneyfied with a purpose.

Somewhere along the way, the spiritual and ascetic in Hinduism has been replaced with the commercial and extravagant, to serve the 'function' of a political party. Which should not surprise anyone, because religion has always been a business and tool for power. As Prof Paul Seabright says in his extraordinary book, 'The Divine Economy', the divine science (religion) has always had a large element of the dismal science (economics) mixed with it. It offers a product (salvation), has a network of providers (priests) and well established distribution channels. There are many 'products' in the market (Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc) and they all compete

It should not surprise anyone, therefore, that the corporatisation of Hinduism now has a righteous, if not liturgical, angle to it, to serve a political
purpose. It has become a bustling share
market where the common investor
gets returns in divine indulgence, and
the new corporates in votes. And those
who do not buy into this stock market
are the new kafins. Nietzsche famously
said that God is dead. He was wrong —
God has now been repositioned as a
marketable product.

— The writer is a former IAS officer

### Scientific spirituality, is it possible?

CIENCE, to me, is not just about the latest technology, medicine and other gadgets. It is a humanistic and ethical way of living. Science guides me how to deal with my professional, emotional and psychosocial needs, fears and anxieties. I derive all my ethical principles and actions from science.

In recent times, with generally fading practices of the ritualistic aspects of organised religions, a trend is emerging—trying to blend the rationality and objectivity of science with the subjective faith of religion and spirituality. Is it possible, meaningful and necessary to do so?

Iwish to share my understanding of what is scientific thinking, and what is the scientific way of life. Science inspires me to live a good life in an ethical, responsible, and joyful manner. Being a lifelong student, researcher and teacher of science, my understanding of the foundational elements of scientific thinking are as follows:

 Science is not any supernatural and transcendental knowledge revealed to one person or a select group of people in one step or in a short span of time.

 Scientific knowledge is a collective and continuous derived chain of explanations put forward by human beings to resolve the queries, questions and doubts about the natural universe.

Scientific explanations are ad hoc and can be repeatedly modified, revised or changed based on new observations and facts.

 Science neither claims nortries to search, discover or reveal any ideal, perfect, absolute and single eternal truth.

Scientific explanations are eventually evident and testable, and these are neither



dependent upon nor based on the will of any real or imaginary entity.

SURESH RATTAN

 Science thrives and evolves by questioning and challenging its concepts, observations, facts, beliefs and persons

beliefs, and persons.

7. Scientific concepts, values and technologies

apply equally to all.

It is not enough to know theoretically what is science, and then claim that I have a scientific attitude and way of life. It is crucial to be also able

to recognise the "unscientific" in our behaviour.
According to me, I will be unscientific:

1. If I have an unquestionable belief, faith and devotion in one or more assumed transcendent.

devotion in one or more assumed transcendent powers or entities imagined to be omnipresent, omniscient, eternal and supernatural. 2. If I perform any kinds of prayers, and other

acts and rituals out of want, fear or helplessness in handling uncertainties and emotional challenges of life.

 If I consider others whose ways of living, dressing up, food habits and physical appearances are different from mine, as being bad, inferior and sinful; and

 If I use supernatural concepts such as fate, destiny and deeds (karma) as tools to legitimise, justify and maintain social inequalities and biological deviations and inadequacies.

Being aware of what is unscientific guides me and gives me a choice of living my life scientifically, morally and ethically without any fear of punishment or craving for a reward.

Living scientifically does not mean that it makes me a robotic, emotionless, inhuman machine. I also face and undergo all kinds of emotions and challenges. I do grieve in sorrow; I do rejoice in the achievements of others; I do become confused and frustrated by the uncertainties and insecurities in life.

Under such emotional situations, I try not to succumb to the pressure of behaving unscientifically for getting any temporary and illusionary solace. I regain stability and peace through literature, philosophy, music, solitude and travels.

What makes us human beings is our moral and ethical matrix. Being honest, trustworthy, helpful, caring, kind, responsible, forgiving and compassionate are the fundamentals of human ethics and decency. These values have emerged and evolved internally with the socio-cultural evolution and needs of human beings. There is nothing supernatural or spiritual about the origin and significance of these values and practices.

For me, scientific thinking and scientific living free me from having to carry the unwanted and unnecessary burden of socially imposed fears and dictates.

— The writer is a biogerontology scientist based in Denmark

# Myths of the Mall and Scandal Point



RAAJA BHASIN

about the origin of the word 'Mall'. These enquiries have been tied to Shimla's eponymous and famous promenade. A little bit of truth, mixed with a substantial amount of falsehood, has been passed around somewhat convincingly and seems to have been quite effective. This is still doing the rounds like a never-ending wheel on the Internet and on that fount of infinite knowledge, 'WhatsApp forwards'.

One claim was that the word 'Mall' is an acronym for 'Married Accommodation Living Lines'. In some, the word 'Married' has been substituted for 'Military'. Well, the military had its lines at a considerable distance from Shimla's Mall and unless the living

was done under shop counters and in drawers stuffed with linen, the story is as false as many of the others that have been connected with the street. That is not to say that people did not live on the Mall. Many shopowners or bankers lived above their commercial premises. These shop-houses were something that gave the place much of its character and ensured that the Mall remained lively even after the banks had closed, and the shops had pulled down their shutters. It did not seem like the deserted places that Chandigarh's Sector 17 or New Delhi's Nehru Place become after shop hours.

Agrees India great from Shimle many

Across India, apart from Shimla, many colonial towns or westernised expansions of older cities had a Mall — Lahore, Amritsar, Mussoorie, Kasauli and Darjeeling, to name just a few. While the process of transfer of the word 'Mall' from England to far-flung former colonies, taking on the role of a 'high street', remains open to calculated conjecture, there is no doubt that it originated in London. There is the kilometre-long Mall that connects Buckingham Palace to Trafalgar Square and continues to serve as a ceremonial route. The second, also in London, is

the famous and fashionable Pall Mall, which goes back to the 17th century and is lined with smart shops and clubs. Both owe the origin of their names and purpose to the game of 'pall-mall', or 'pell-mell', a precursor of croquet and played with a ball and mallet. In turn, the English word for the game is derived from the Italian pallamaglio, meaning a 'ball and mallet'.

Other whiffs of false news, fake stories and accepted reality have also meandered over the Mall. One being that no Indians were permitted there. Any number of old photographs beliethis fact. Also, there was an overwhelming number of Indians who owned shops and other establishments and almost all the staff were Indian. This, however, does have a small ring of truth. There was a municipal bylaw that proclaimed that no job-porter or 'coolie' would 'solicit employment, loiter or carry loads' during the evenings on specified streets — including the Mall. This bylaw was twisted to include 'ill-dressed' Indians and later, to khadi-clad freedom fighters, who would be hustled off the street.

But perhaps nothing has been as accepted as the multiple myths of Scandal Point. Sad-

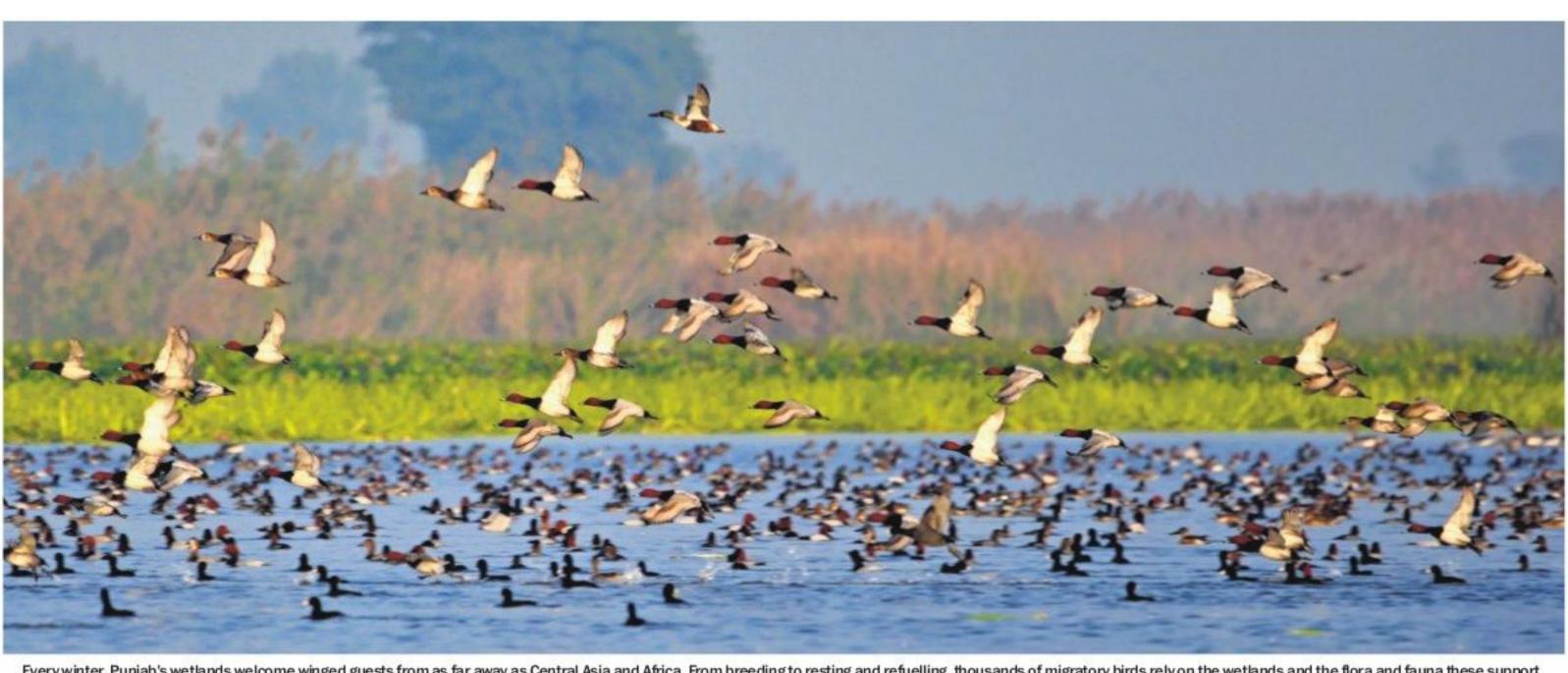
ly the most salacious story of them all is that there was no scandal. When the soon-to-befamous Rudyard Kipling came to Shimla, the 'summer capital' of India, he wrote of its glittering social swirl and endless gossip. He created a world that was part-fiction, partfable and part-reality. Those word-images are still with us. In 1888, Kipling's story 'The Education of Otis Yeere' was first published. Of his creation, two characters appear in the story. There is Mrs Mallow and the formidable Mrs Hauksbee, who "...was sometimes nice to her own sex", while she had "the wisdom of the Serpent, the logical coherence of Man, the fearlessness of Child and the triple intuition of the woman". It is in this story that the phrase 'Scandal Point' first appears in print: "Your salon would become a glorified Peliti's," says Mrs Mallow, "a 'Scandal Point' by lamplight." From this moment on, this phrase from Kipling's pen enters perceived reality and with passing years, steadily gathers more stories.

Going by the popular tale, a Maharaja of Patiala carried off a British Viceroy's daughter (or wife) from this spot on Shimla's Mall. The Maharaja in question, at the time of the supposed incident, wasn't born and if he was, he would have been an infant. Years ago, as now, little or large gatherings have sorted out the world at this crossroad and exchanged gossip. Within the course of a conversation, governments have risen and fallen on 'Scandal Point'. There is hushed talk of 'who ran off with whom' and 'who would like to run off with whom'. In a word, 'scandal'.

The so-called connection with Patiala probably stems from the fact that the Patiala durbar had a 'Vakilkhaana' in the Middle Bazaar, just below 'Scandal Point'. Here, employees of the Patiala durbar worked and conducted the sundry matters of this influential princely state. In 1929, 10 disgruntled citizens of Patiala drew up a list of charges against the Maharaja. The British Viceroy of India, Lord Willingdon, cleared the Maharaja of all charges. Employees at the 'Vakilkhaana', like many others, would probably sun themselves and air their views to anyone who would care to listen. With this incident, both the Maharaja and 'Scandal Point' have passed into urban legend.

— The writer is a Shimla-based author

# INDEPTH



Every winter, Punjab's wetlands welcome winged guests from as far away as Central Asia and Africa. From breeding to resting and refuelling, thousands of migratory birds rely on the wetlands and the flora and fauna these support.

# UPLIFITING.

### It's been a busy season in Punjab's wetlands as migratory birds arrive in larger numbers

AMAN SOOD

T'S a much-anticipated ritual at Punjab's wetlands that never fails to spring a surprise. Every year, the Punjab Wildlife Department documents sightings of migratory birds from as far away as Central Asia and Africa. As climate change and global warming affect wildlife patterns, careful consideration is given to the absence and presence of the avian guests. This time around, it has been a productive and uplifting outing for the department staff, omithologists, bird-watchers and

> enthusiasts alike. Much to their relief and delight, the migratory birds, including several rare ones, have come in swarms.

> According to the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests, Punjab has 1,143 mapped wetlands, with an area of roughly around 90,000 hectares. There are 89 Ramsar sites in India; it ranks third globally in the number of such sites.

Punjab's prominence on

the world wildlife map got a boost in 2020 when three more wetlands were accorded the international Ramsar tag. These sites are recognised as being of significant value not only for the country or the countries in which they are located, but for humanity as a whole. (There are currently more than 2,500 Ramsar sites around the world, covering over 2.5 million square kilometres, an area larger than Mexico).

Punjab already had three Ramsar sites — Harike, which falls in Kapurthala, Ferozepur

and Tam Taran districts; Kanjli in Kapurtha la district; and Ropar. To the list were added the Keshopur community reserve, Beas conservation reserve and Nangal wildlife sanctuary, taking the number to six.

Dharminder Sharma, Principal Chief Conservator of Forests and head of the Forest Force, says spotting raptors like the Redheaded Falcon, Peregrine Falcon, Eurasian Hobby and Eastern Imperial Eagle at Harike and Keshopur-Miani shows that the Punjab wetlands continue to attract birds from faroff areas. "It indicates that our wetlands have a good prey base for these raptors. The preservation of wildlife, especially migratory birds, remains the top priority of the department," he adds. "Birds from as far away as Siberia have turned up, which is a rare phenomenon."

Gitanjali Kanwar, Senior Coordinator, Aquatic Biodiversity, World Wildlife Fund-India, says the turnout of water birds in Punjab's wetlands continues to be "decently good" despite challenges at the global level. "Flocks of rare birds like Northern Lapwing and Black-tailed Godwit were sighted at Harike. Species like Jerdon's Babler, Rufous-vented Prinia and Short-eared Owls have also been spotted," she adds.

"There's been a marginal increase in the number of water birds (resident and migratory) in Punjab's wetlands. The winter season has been very brief this year and rare waterbirds and species of high conservation significance have been spotted. These include the flamingos in Harike, flocks of Northern Lapwing and raptors like Steppe and Eastern Imperial Eagle in Keshopur-Miani and Shalapattan wetlands. The Nangal wetland, like every year, had Blacknecked Grebes," says Kanwar.



A pair of Greater Flamingos seen this year at Harike after last sighting at the same place in 2017.

Punjab Chief Conservator of Forests (Wildlife) Satender Sagar claims the recent sighting of the Bar-headed Goose is a welcome sign for the state's wetlands as this goose species breeds in Central Asia in colonies of thou sands near mountain lakes and during winter in South Asia. "The unique thing about this bird is that it flies very high, and even crosses the Himalayas to visit Punjab, flying over difficult terrains and extreme altitudes," says Sagar, excited about the frequent sightings at Punjab wetlands.

Amid the positive news, a note of caution comes from Jaskaran Sandhu, former member of the Punjab State Board for Wildlife. "Global warming is changing weather patterns and affecting bird migration. Delayed winter, pollution and shrinking water bodies are all affecting migration of birds across the globe. It's a challenge we must never lose sight of," he says.

"Many bird species migrate in order to survive. However, migration is a perilous journey. Only a small number of birds are actually threatened by natural events while human activities are the source for most dangers," says Maj AP Singh (retd), another former member of the Punjab State Board for Wildlife. An avid bird-watcher, with an experience of more than 40 years, he adds that the loss of habitats due to pollution or encroachment for settlement, agriculture, grazing, etc, is the main threat migratory birds face. "They are dependent on finding suitable breeding and wintering grounds as well as stopover sites, along their flyways, where they can rest and feed. The loss of any of these sites during their annual cycle could have a dramatic impact on the birds' chances of survival. Poaching remains another threat."

As per the initial sightings by the Wildlife Department and the World Wildlife Fund, the migratory birds that have been spotted include the Spot-billed Duck, Ruddy Shelduck, Mallard, Northern Pintail, Comb Duck, Coot, Dabchick, Northern Shoveler, Lesser Whistling Duck, Domicile Crane, Greater Flamingo, Ferruginous Pochard, Peregrine Falcon, Long-eared Owl, Common Pochard, Woolly-necked Stork, Eurasian Coot, Gadwal, Greylag Geese, Little Cormorant, Pied Avocet, Great Cormorant, Common Teal, Black-tailed Godwit, Steppe Gull and Brown-headed Gull.

Records from Harike show sightings of Bonelli's Eagle, Hen Harrier, Peregrine Falcon, Red-headed Falcon, Cotton Pygmy Goose, Northern Lapwing and Greatercrested Grebe.

May 10 is World Migratory Bird Day, but it's a good time to remember UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres' message: "As they travel the globe, migratory birds lift our spirits and remind us of nature, connecting people, ecosystems and nations." And his terse reminder: "Our continued encroachment on nature and the destruction of vital habitats are putting many migratory birds at risk of extinction."

Any positive development thus is a moment to cherish, and also to reflect. Protecting the habitats of migratory birds is of critical importance.

#### **PUNJAB'S WETLANDS**

- Keshopur-Miani community reserve in Gurdaspur, spread over 343.9 hectares (ha), is a natural wetland. It is the only habitat for Sarus and common cranes in the state.
- Beas conservation reserve, spread over a 185-km stretch of the Beas river starting from Talwara to Harike headworks, covers seven districts - Hoshiarpur, Gurdaspur, Amritsar, Jalandhar, Kapurthala, Tarn Taran and Ferozepur. It is the only place in the country that hosts the Indus River Dolphins.
- The man-made wetland of Nangal wildlife sanctuary, with an area of 116 ha, came into existence as a result of the Bhakra-Nangal project in 1961. The surrounding forests are located in the highly eco-sensitive Shivalik foothills.

#### RECENT CENSUS

- In Harike, 89 bird species were recorded with a total count of 55,059 birds, up from 50,529 birds seen in 2024.
- In Kanjli wetland, 20 species and 443 birds were recorded this year as compared to 23 species and 669 birds in 2024.
- In Keshopur, 78 species with 13,676 birds have been recorded this year as compared to 10,857 birds of 66 species in 2024.



flight. The pale, deep-chested, long-winged gull chiefly feeds on fish (particularly dead), insects and small mammals.

THE RAMSAR TITLE

A Ramsar site is a wetland designated to be of international importance under the Ramsar Convention. The Convention on Wetlands, known as the Ramsar Convention, is an intergovernmental environmental treaty established in 1971 by UNESCO, which came into force in 1975. It is named after the city of Ramsar in Iran, where the convention was signed.

# Why you should never leave a child alone in a car

#### Even on cloudy days with lower ambient air conditions, the temperatures inside can reach dangerous levels

Cars seem to hold a special attraction for children

during playtime, and many get trapped when the

doors get locked automatically. ISTOCK

PUSHPA GIRIMAJI

Red-headed

preys on

small birds

and usually

PHOTOS BY

THE WRITER

hunts in pairs.

Falcon mostly

EAVING a child alone in a car is fraught with danger. If the car is locked with all the windows closed, the child runs the risk of suffering severe heat stroke, as cars heat up very quickly and children are extremely susceptible to heat. If you keep the engine idling, with the key in the ignition and the air-conditioner running, your child can get kidnapped, or your car may get stolen, along with the child.

A couple in Kerala learnt this the hard way when their car got stolen, along with their toddler in the backseat. in January this year. On their way to a relative's house in Kozhikode, the couple stopped at a bakery. Their child was sleeping at the back, so they left the car engine idling to keep the air-conditioning on and stepped out to buy a few items. To their horror, their car was stolen, along with the child at the back! Fortunately for them, it all ended on a happy note — the thief was caught and the child, abandoned after two hours on the roadside, was picked up safe and sound!

There was an almost identical incident in Delhi last June. Here, the couple left their two kids — an 11-yearold girl and her three-year-old brother— in the car, with the AC running, while they went into a confectionery shop in East Delhi. When they returned, they found their car stolen, along with the children. After a threehour police chase involving 20 police vehicles, the culprits abandoned the vehicle and the children too.

One may find it hard to believe, but there are innumer-

able instances of parents, and in some cases a grandparent, leaving behind a sleeping child in the car by mistake. There are also cases of parents leaving a child behind in the car while going on a short errand, believing the car to be a safe place. With the windows up and the car locked. the temperature inside the car goes up so quickly that a child is

In May last year, a couple from Kota district, Rajasthan, lost their three-year-old daughter to vehicular hyperthermia. The parents were going to a wed-

unable to with stand it.

ding with their two daughters and when the father stopped the car in front of the venue, his wife and the elder daughter exited. The father presumed that all three had left and so parked and locked the car and went in, leaving the sleeping

child behind. By the time they realised that threeyear-old Gorvika was missing and went to get her, it

In another tragic incident on October 30, three-yearold Vartika became a victim of heat stroke in a locked car in Meerut. In this case, it was not her parents, but a colleague of her father who took her for a ride in the car and then left her in the parked car, planning to return shortly. The heat inside the car killed the child.

There are several websites that help you calculate the

temperature inside a car at different ambient temperatures. When the outside temperature is 30°C, for example, the temperature inside a car goes up to almost 50°C (48.89°C, to be precise) in just 30 minutes! In 15 minutes, it hovers over 43°C. Eighty per cent of the temperature rise, it is estimated, occurs with-

in the first half an hour. A study published in March 2009 in the International Journal of Meteorology reveals that even on cloudy days with lower ambient air temperatures, the temperatures inside a car can reach dangerous levels.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration in the United States says that a child's body temperature rises three to five times faster than an adult's and heat stroke occurs when the body

temperature reaches 104°F (40°C). A child can die when it reaches 107°F (41.6°C).

Cars seem to hold a special attraction for children when it comes to playtime and that's how many of them enter the vehicle and get trapped when the doors automatically get locked. In Kochi, Kerala, two-yearold Rithick got inside his father's car parked in front of the house and locked himself up by pressing the lock button on the key. The parents did not have the spare key and eventually had to call the Fire and Res-

cue Services to get the child out — the entire process took 45 minutes early in the morning and the child was traumatised inside. There was a similar incident in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, in July. Here, the parents were lucky but there are many unfortunate cases where the children are found too late.

In November, four siblings, aged 2-7 years, died in a car in Radadiya village in Gujarat's Amreli district. The parents had gone to work on a farm and the children got into the car of the farm owner and were unable to get out when the doors automatically locked. By the time they were found, all had succumbed to heat stroke.

Earlier, in May, a three-year-old girl in Bhadradri Kothagudem district in Telangana met the same fate when she accidentally got locked inside a car parked in front of her house. The same month, six-year-old Kaunen and his four-year-old cousin Abdullah, playing in the compound of their house in Raebareli district in Uttar Pradesh, got into a parked SUV and got locked. Heat stroke claimed their lives.

Amonth prior to that, two children reported missing by their parents in Central Mumbai were found dead in an abandoned car parked in Antop Hill.

So, never leave a child alone in a car, even for a short time, and if you are the forgetful type, keep a paper reminding you of the child at the back, pasted on the windshield! Make sure that any child that enters a car exits safely. Always keep your car locked and store the key in a place where children cannot access it.

> - The writer is a consumer rights and safety expert