











Editor's TAKE

## Balochistan on the Boil

The deadly train hijacking episode has brought the region's struggle to the fore

The recent hijacking of the Jaffar Express in Balochistan marks another deadly episode in the decades-long struggle for Baloch independence. The attack, orchestrated by the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), underscores the escalating insurgency in Pakistan's largest but most neglected province. The Pakistani military's swift operation to neutralise the hijackers may have ended the immediate crisis, but it has done little to address the underlying grievances that continue to fuel the Baloch nationalist movement.

On March 11, armed militants targeted the Jaffar Express, a passenger train traveling from Quetta to Peshawar. The BLA demanded the release of Baloch political prisoners and individuals allegedly abducted by Pakistani security forces. Pakistani military forces swiftly launched a rescue operation. The successful yet costly operation highlights the deteriorating security situation in Balochistan and the growing boldness of separatist groups.

The hijacking is not an isolated incident but rather a continuation of the Baloch people's longstanding quest for self-determination. Balochistan, rich in natural resources but historically marginalised, has seen multiple uprisings since Pakistan's creation in 1947. The roots of the conflict date back to what many Baloch consider a betrayal by Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Pakistan's founder. At the time of Partition, the princely state of Kalat, a major part of present-day Balochistan, opted for independence. However, in 1948, under pressure from Pakistan and with little international support, Kalat was forcibly annexed. This fueled deep resentment among the Baloch people and led to an armed insurgency that has resurfaced in different forms over the decades.

Balochistan, despite being rich in resources such as gold, copper, and natural gas, remains the most impoverished province in Pakistan. Baloch nationalists argue that the region's wealth is exploited by the central government, with little benefit to the local population.

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has further intensified tensions, as Baloch rebels view Chinese investments and infrastructure projects as a means of increasing Pakistan's control over their land without addressing local grievances. Adding to the discontent are widespread allegations of human rights abuses, including enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings of activists and civilians. The Pakistani state has often responded with heavy-handed military crackdowns, further deepening resentment.

While the Baloch nationalist movement has waxed and waned over the years, recent developments suggest it is gaining momentum. The BLA and other militant groups, such as the Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF), have intensified their attacks on security forces, government infrastructure, and projects associated with CPEC. Targeted assaults on Chinese nationals working in Pakistan further indicate a strategy aimed at destabilising foreign investments and pressuring the Pakistani state. The hijacking of the Jaffar Express is a testament to the insurgents' evolving tactics and growing audacity. By targeting civilian infrastructure and taking hostages, the BLA has demonstrated its capability to conduct large-scale operations, signaling an emboldened separatist movement.

A military response alone will not quell the insurgency. Addressing the root causes—political disenfranchisement, economic marginalisation, and human rights violations—is crucial for any long-term resolution. The ongoing struggle in Balochistan is a reminder of the consequences of neglecting ethnic and regional grievances. Without meaningful dialogue and political solutions, Pakistan risks further destabilisation in its most resource-rich yet volatile province. The recent train hijacking may have been neutralised, but the broader Baloch insurgency remains far from over.

## Leaderspeak



We fully respect the sovereignty of Mauritius with regard to Chagos. We will extend our cooperation through forums such as the Colombo Security Conclave, Indian Ocean Rim Association, and Indian Ocean Conference. Be it the Global South, the Indian Ocean, or the African continent, Mauritius is our important partner. We have come up with SAGAR vision for the stability and prosperity of this entire region. India shall also assist in setting up of National Maritime Information Sharing Centre in Mauritius

NARENDRA MODI, PRIME MINISTER OF INDIA



# Towards a Fit and Trim India

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's latest initiative to combat obesity and curb excessive oil consumption is timely as obesity rates are rising sharply, underscoring urgent need for preventive healthcare and dietary reforms

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent initiative to combat obesity and reduce excessive cooking oil consumption has ignited nationwide discussions on health and nutrition. The campaign underscores the importance of preventive healthcare and dietary changes in addressing India's growing obesity crisis. Given the alarming rise in obesity worldwide, this initiative is both timely and necessary and has received support from healthcare professionals, sportspeople, and the World Health Organisation.

India is witnessing a sharp increase in obesity, with the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) reporting that 23% of men and 24% of women are now overweight or obese. Urban areas show even higher numbers due to sedentary lifestyles and unhealthy diets. By now, we all know that obesity increases the risk of diabetes, heart disease, hypertension, and certain cancers, placing a heavy burden on India's healthcare system. The WHO has identified obesity as a major global health crisis, and India is rapidly catching up with Western countries in obesity rates.

However, while addressing obesity through lifestyle changes is essential, an even more pressing concern needs urgent attention—food adulteration. In 2018-19, the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) found that almost one-third of food samples tested in India failed quality checks due to adulteration. Media reports highlight alarming instances of harmful substances being added to food, such as urea, starch, and detergent in milk; synthetic dyes and artificial ripening agents in fruits; chalk in common salt; artificial colors in spices; formalin in fish; iron filings or colored leaves in tea; synthetic whiteners, chalk powder, or soapstone in rice and wheat; and lead chromate in pulses. These adulterants pose serious health risks, including food poisoning, kidney damage, cancer, and neurological disorders.

Food adulteration is now so rampant that, at times, we don't even need food inspectors to detect it. Walk through any vegetable market, and you will see unnaturally shiny apples, bright green peas, pointed gourds, and glossy brinjals. These are not signs of freshness but of harmful chemicals like wax, artificial dyes, and pesticides. Soak vegetables in water, and you may see colors leaching out—clear evidence of adulteration.

While obesity can be managed by raising awareness about the dangers of consuming processed foods with unhealthy



ingredients or overconsuming edible oil and encouraging lifestyle changes, avoiding adulterated food is far more challenging. It is difficult to detect adulteration, and the issue is deeply rooted in systemic flaws in food production and regulation. Unless food adulteration is effectively tackled, even so-called "healthy" choices can be hazardous, exposing consumers to harmful substances despite their best efforts to maintain a nutritious diet.

Due to the widespread issue of food adulteration, many people have stopped eating fruits with their peels or raw salads, fearing pesticide residues and chemical coatings. This shift highlights how food adulteration forces people to compromise on natural and healthier eating habits, ultimately hindering efforts to promote a balanced diet and combat obesity.

With adulteration becoming so prevalent, it's no surprise that people are turning to organic food. The organic food market is expanding rapidly worldwide. In India, it was valued at around \$1.5 billion in 2023 and is projected to reach \$8.9 billion by 2032. However, organic food in India is much costlier than conventionally grown food, making it less accessible to middle—and lower-income groups. To make matters worse, fake organic labels

have become a growing concern. As demand rises, many brands and sellers misuse the "organic" tag, passing off conventionally grown food at a premium price under the guise of organic produce. If left unchecked, this defeats the very purpose of switching to organic food, leaving us right back where we started.



VISHWARUPA BHATTACHARYA

PM Modi's past campaigns, such as Swachh Bharat Abhiyan and the promotion of yoga through the International Day of Yoga, have demonstrated his ability to mobilise public participation and drive meaningful change. His efforts to combat obesity are also likely to strike a chord with the masses. However, while his past initiatives have successfully influenced public hygiene and global health trends, his latest campaign against obesity will have a meaningful impact only if the issue of food adulteration is effectively addressed.

In the fight against obesity, food adulteration is the elephant in the room. Addressing it first will ensure that when

Indians make healthier choices, they are truly consuming safe and nutritious food.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's initiative to combat obesity and reduce excessive cooking oil consumption is a crucial step toward improving public health in India.

Indeed, rampant food adulteration undermines even the best health-conscious efforts, exposing consumers to harmful substances despite their intent to eat well. The presence of hazardous chemicals in everyday foods, from fruits and vegetables to dairy and staples, poses severe health risks.

PM Modi's past campaigns have successfully driven large-scale behavioral changes, and his anti-obesity initiative holds similar promise. However, its success depends on a holistic approach that includes stringent food safety regulations, public awareness about adulteration and affordable access to truly healthy food.

Strengthening regulatory frameworks, enforcing stricter penalties for food fraud, and promoting verified organic practices can help bridge the gap.

(The writer is Additional Director, Research Division, Rajya Sabha Secretariat. Views expressed are personal)

## Four-Day Workweek: Challenges and Promises

### SECOND Opinion



RACHNA LAKHPATRI

The concept of a four-day workweek has taken the world by storm, promising enhanced work-life balance and efficiency. However, implementing such a model in a heterogeneous and populous nation like India—home to over 1.4 billion people—presents significant challenges.

India's labor market has distinct complexities, making a four-day workweek more of an aspiration than an immediately achievable solution. The country's economy encompasses sprawling informal sectors alongside emerging knowledge industries, creating a stark divide in working styles and employment patterns.

The informal economy, which employs approximately 90% of India's workforce, operates beyond conventional employment paradigms. Agricultural laborers, small business owners, and daily wage earners typically work based on demand rather than a fixed schedule. For such workers, a four-day workweek may hold little relevance, as their earnings are directly tied to the number of hours worked.

Conversely, India's expanding service and technology sectors may be better positioned to experiment with compressed workweeks. Some e-commerce organisations have already tested four-day workweeks, reporting promising results in employee satisfaction and productivity. However, these

remain exceptions rather than the norm.

Cultural perceptions of work in India present another significant hurdle. The deeply ingrained belief that long hours demonstrate commitment and dedication fosters resistance to reduced workweeks. This cultural mindset suggests that even if policies change, shifting attitudes may take considerably longer.

Infrastructure challenges further complicate the feasibility of a four-day workweek. Many Indian workers endure long commutes due to inadequate transportation networks and urban congestion. As a result, even with a compressed work schedule, the actual time available for leisure and personal activities might remain limited.

Despite these challenges, there are compelling reasons to explore pathways toward introducing a four-day workweek in India. Research suggests potential benefits, including reduced burnout, lower absenteeism, and improved mental health-factors that could address key workplace issues currently affecting Indian employees.

A sector-specific approach may offer the most viable path forward. Pilot programs in knowledge-intensive industries could serve as testing grounds, allowing successful models to be gradually expanded to other sectors. Additionally, government incentives for businesses willing to adopt such programs could accelerate broader acceptance.

The pandemic has already reshaped work arrangements worldwide, including in India. Remote and hybrid work

models have demonstrated that productivity is not necessarily dependent on physical presence or rigid schedules. This shift in perspective creates opportunities for workplace innovations, including compressed workweeks.

Rather than viewing the four-day workweek as a universal, short-term solution, India could integrate it into a broader movement toward more flexible, worker-oriented employment practices. While full-scale implementation across industries may be a distant goal, selective adoption in specific sectors could lay the groundwork for wider acceptance as the economy and infrastructure continue to evolve.

The journey toward workweek reform in India will be long, culturally complex, and closely tied to the nation's economic landscape. However, initiating the conversation is a crucial first step in the right direction.

The four-day workweek presents both opportunities and challenges for India. While its informal economy and cultural perceptions pose obstacles, the growing service and technology sectors offer a testing ground for its feasibility. Infrastructure limitations and deep-rooted work traditions may slow widespread adoption, but pilot programs and government incentives could drive gradual acceptance. The pandemic has already reshaped work models, highlighting flexibility's potential. Rather than an immediate, universal solution, a sector-specific approach could pave the way for broader implementation.

(The author is a motivator and freelance writer. Views expressed are personal)

## Letters to the Editor

### PRIME MINISTER MODI IN MAURITIUS

Madam — Prime Minister Modi's second visit to Mauritius on its National Day, following his 2015 trip, has revitalized the previously weakened ties between the two nations. The ritual of pouring Gangajal into Mauritian waters symbolizes the cleansing of past grievances and has led to the signing of eight Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs), including a strengthened strategic partnership focused on artificial intelligence, set to begin soon. Once under British rule, Mauritius saw the arrival of Indian laborers who endured harsh conditions and exploitation. These laborers, known as 'Girmityas' or 'People of Agreement', share a common history and cultural ties with India. This enduring rapport is expected to foster mutually beneficial developments in the region. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's second visit to Mauritius on its National Day, following his 2015 trip, has significantly strengthened the ties between the two nations. Historically, Mauritius and India share deep-rooted cultural and historical connections. Modi's visit included a symbolic ritual of pouring Gangajal into Mauritian waters, signifying the cleansing of past grievances. This visit resulted in the signing of eight Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs), including a strategic partnership focused on artificial intelligence, set to commence soon. This visit marks a new chapter in their enduring relationship.

RS NARULA | PATIALA

### EUROPE FIGHTS TRUMP TARIFFS

Madam — The European Union announced on Wednesday, March 12, that it would impose retaliatory trade measures, introducing new duties on U.S. industrial and agricultural products. This decision came just hours after the Trump administration increased tariffs on all steel and aluminum imports to 25 percent. As the world's largest trading bloc, the EU had anticipated the U.S. tariffs and prepared accordingly. However, the measures still place significant strain on already tense transatlantic relations. Just last month, in February, Washington warned Europe that it would need to take responsibility for its own security in the future. The EU's retaliatory measures will initially target U.S. goods worth approximately 26 billion euros (USD 28 billion). These measures will not be limited to steel and aluminum products but will also affect textiles, home appliances, and agricultural goods. Additionally, items such as motorcycles, bourbon whiskey, peanut butter, and jeans will face renewed tariffs. With this, an open trade war has erupted between the European Union and the United States, which may escalate into a serious and dangerous situation in the coming days. The economic impact could extend beyond these regions, affecting countries like India, which may be particularly vulnerable due to its weaker economy. This escalating trade war between the EU and the US threatens global economic stability, with potential ripple effects on various nations.

BHAGWAN THADANI | MUMBAI

### TRUMP PUSHING INDIA INTO TRADE WAR

Madam — President Donald Trump, who champions the slogan "America First," has drawn India into his trade war. He has threatened that if India does not reduce import tariffs on American goods, the US will impose equivalent tariffs on Indian goods starting in April. This has placed India in a difficult position. Calling India the "Tariff King," Trump argues that the taxes India imposes on American goods are unfair. When he took a similar stance against China, the Chinese government responded aggressively, demonstrating its readiness not only for a trade war but for any kind of confrontation. However, the situation between India and the US is different, raising the question: Is India prepared for such a scenario? Last year, trade between India and the US amounted to \$118 billion, with India exporting goods worth \$77 billion and importing \$40 billion. The major imports from the US include crude oil, pearls and precious stones, nuclear reactors and related materials, boilers, machinery, and other equipment. On the other hand, India's major exports to the US consist of automobiles, textiles, and metals. If Trump's tariff threat becomes a reality, these three Indian industries could suffer a significant blow. The US is struggling with a \$1.2 trillion trade deficit and a market flooded with Chinese products, which has become a major concern. Trump's policies aim to address this issue. Trump's background as a businessman is evident in the strategic moves he is making.

DATTAPRASAD SHIRODKAR | MUMBAI

### TRAIN HIJACKING IN BALOCHISTAN EXPOSES PAKISTAN'S FAULTLINES

The recent hijacking of the Jaffar Express in Balochistan has once again highlighted the deep-rooted insurgency in the region. The Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) seized control of the train, which was carrying over 500 passengers, including 214 Pakistani soldiers.

The group issued a 48-hour ultimatum, demanding the release of Baloch prisoners and the withdrawal of Pakistani forces. In response, the Pakistani military launched a rescue operation, deploying Special Service Group (SSG) commandos. Reports indicate that 104 hostages have been freed, while 16 militants were killed. However, several hostages also lost their lives during the operation, further escalating tensions.

The local population has long accused the government of exploiting their resources while denying them political and economic rights. This discontent has fueled multiple insurgencies over the decades, with separatist groups like the

BLA leading armed resistance against the state. The Pakistani military's heavy-handed response, including enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings, has only intensified the unrest.

A major factor driving the insurgency is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which includes the strategic Gwadar Port, is seen as an effort by Pakistan and China to exploit Balochistan's resources without benefiting the local population. Baloch insurgents have repeatedly attacked CPEC infrastructure and Chinese investments, viewing them as symbols of foreign occupation.

The BLA's warning after the hijacking—demanding that Pakistan and China leave Balochistan—reinforces this narrative. The crisis in Balochistan poses a significant challenge for Pakistan. A sustainable solution requires dialogue, economic inclusion, and an end to military repression.

SACHIN TRIPATHI | BHOPAL

# Carney: From Central Banker to Prime Minister

Mark Carney's rise from a globally respected central banker to Canada's Prime Minister signals a dramatic shift in the country's political landscape. Among his most urgent tasks is repairing Canada's strained relationship with India, a key economic and geopolitical partner

FIRST  
Column

Mark Carney's transition from a globally acclaimed central banker to Canada's Prime Minister marks a profound shift in leadership dynamics. Renowned for his crisis management at the helm of the Bank of Canada and the Bank of England, he now faces the uncharted terrain of political leadership. Taking charge of a deeply divided political landscape, he must navigate a strained Indo-Canadian relationship and the resurgence of protectionism in a Trump-led America.

## From Central Banker to Political Leader

While his economic acumen lends him credibility in managing fiscal policy and trade relations, his greatest challenges will be diplomatic—repairing strained ties with India, navigating a hostile White House, and restoring public trust in Canada's institutions. His leadership style, devoid of political baggage but rooted in financial pragmatism, will determine whether he succeeds in stabilising Canada's position on the global stage.

## Repairing Indo-Canadian Relations

It is well known that former Prime Minister Justin Trudeau alienated much of the Indian community in Canada by openly supporting Khalistani elements, severely straining relations with India. Carney has indicated that he favors stronger ties with India, a move that would benefit both nations. Unlike Trudeau, who pursued a self-serving political agenda at the cost of diplomatic relations, Carney must now leverage his skills and experience to mend fences with New Delhi.

One of Carney's most urgent foreign policy tasks will be repairing Canada's damaged relationship with India. Rebuilding trust through direct talks with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and senior officials—while avoiding public accusations that could further aggravate tensions—will be crucial. Key measures include:

1. Addressing India's concerns about pro-Khalistani extremism operating from Canadian soil.
2. Strengthening counterterrorism collaboration with India.
3. Reviving discussions on the stalled Canada-India Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA).
4. Encouraging Canadian investments in India's technology and infrastructure sectors.
5. Attracting Indian investments into Canada's energy and AI industries.
6. Easing visa restrictions for Indian students and professionals to reinforce diaspora-driven relations.

## Tackling Khalistani Extremism

Managing the presence of Khalistani elements in Canada remains a significant challenge. Trudeau's perceived leniency toward these extremists led to a diplo-



matic crisis, especially after the Nijjar controversy. If Carney aims to restore relations with India while maintaining domestic stability, he must strike a balance between national security and democratic freedoms.

- Potential steps include:
1. Directing CSIS and the RCMP to closely monitor extremist groups.
  2. Increasing surveillance on pro-Khalistani funding networks.
  3. Implementing stricter regulations on events that glorify violence against India.
  4. Enhancing intelligence-sharing with India's RAW and IB.
  5. Considering the deportation of individuals involved in terrorist financing or inciting violence against India.
  6. Establishing a bilateral security task force to monitor extremist activities.

Carney must also distinguish between moderate Sikhs and extremist Khalistanis, ensuring that law enforcement targets violent elements rather than peaceful Sikh advocacy groups. His approach must be security-driven rather than politically motivated—unlike Trudeau's strategy of appeasement.



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## GARNEY MUST ALSO DISTINGUISH BETWEEN MODERATE SIKHS AND EXTREMIST KHALISTANIS, ENSURING THAT LAW ENFORCEMENT TARGETS VIOLENT ELEMENTS RATHER THAN PEACEFUL SIKH GROUPS

## Balancing Indo-Canadian Relations and Domestic Politics

Restoring trust with India while managing domestic political sensitivities will require a delicate balancing act. Carney's lack of political baggage allows him to take a fresh approach, while his global reputation ensures India takes his diplomatic overtures seriously.

Leveraging economic incentives to reset relations with India could provide him with a major diplomatic victory early in his tenure. However, he will face opposition from pro-Khalistani groups in Canada, accusations of suppressing free speech and resistance from left-leaning Liberals who supported Trudeau's stance. If he implements a balanced policy—cracking down on extremists while protecting legitimate Sikh voices—he can repair Indo-Canadian ties without shaking domestic instability.

## The Indian Diaspora's Influence

The Indian community in Canada, comprising approximately 1.86 million individuals according to the 2021 census, represents about 5.1 per cent of the national population. This demographic has significantly influenced Canada's multicultural landscape, particularly in urban centers such as Toronto, Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton, and Montreal.

Notable political figures from this community include:

Jagmeet Singh: Leader of the New Democratic Party (NDP) since 2017 and the first person of Indian descent to lead a major federal party.

Harjit Singh Sajjan: MP for Vancouver South and former Minister of National Defense.

Anita Anand: Appointed Minister of National

Defense in 2021.

Bardish Chagger: Former Minister of Diversity and Inclusion and Youth.

Chandra Arya: MP for Nepean, Ontario, and advocate for economic development and immigrant integration.

## Political Engagement and Diplomatic Tensions

The Indian community's active political participation underscores its commitment to Canada's democratic processes. However, relations between Canada and India deteriorated following the October 2024 murder of Sikh separatist Hardeep Singh Nijjar in British Columbia.

Trudeau accused the Indian government of orchestrating violence against dissidents in Canada, leading to reciprocal diplomatic expulsions and further straining bilateral ties. This crisis has raised concerns among the Indian diaspora, particularly regarding immigration, education, and economic exchanges. For Carney, engaging constructively with the Indian community is crucial. Addressing their concerns, fostering inclusive policies and working toward diplomatic reconciliation with India will be essential steps in strengthening Canada's social and economic fabric.

## Domestic Political Challenges

Carney assumes office amid deepening political divides. The Liberal Party has suffered declining public confidence, particularly in Western Canada, where Trudeau's policies alienated oil-dependent provinces like Alberta and Saskatchewan. Meanwhile, right-wing populism has gained traction, mirroring global trends.

While Carney's lack of electoral experience may be a vulnerability, his credibility as an economic strategist could help him regain voter trust.

Managing inflation, stabilising interest rates, and addressing affordability concerns will be immediate priorities. Gaining support from both progressive and conservative voters will be crucial for effective governance, while restoring confidence within his party and among centrist voters will determine his political longevity.

## Conclusion

Carney's leadership will be defined by his ability to steer Canada through complex domestic and global challenges.

A strategic recalibration of ties with India could elevate his stature, but any misstep—particularly on the Khalistani issue—risks deepening tensions and undermining economic prospects in South Asia. India will also have to understand the prioritise and compulsions of the new Canadian prime minister to reboot the relations.

(Writer is a strategic affairs columnist and senior political analyst. Views expressed are personal)

## Ramzan and Navratri: A Shared Journey of Self-Restraint and Purity

## India's fragile trade deal with the US

Ramzan and Navratri symbolise the essence of all that is good, pure, and noble in the two religions: Islam and Hinduism. The common message for devotees of these respective religions is to achieve excellence in behavior through introspection and self-restraint.

The Father of the Nation, Mahatma Gandhi, once said, "There are limits to self-indulgence, none to self-restraint." Truly, self-restraint plays an important role in shaping human behavior in different societal and cultural settings. The entire concept of social control is based on the type, range, and depth of restraint exhibited in human behavior. More often than not, we see laws being violated, manipulated, and disobeyed because they are externally imposed. In contrast, by practicing self-restraint, we become the masters of our actions and, in turn, our destiny.

Ramzan, the ninth lunar month in the Islamic calendar, is a period of spiritual reflection and piety, observed through fasting from dawn to sunset and increased charitable deeds by Muslims worldwide.

The objective behind this month-long exercise is to cultivate self-control and self-restraint through fasting, with the goal of achieving excellence in behavior and guarding against evil. According to the Quran (Verse 2:183):

"O you who believe, fasting is prescribed for you as it was prescribed to those before you so that you may become righteous."

Ramzan is seen as a time for introspection and strengthening one's connection with God. One night during Ramzan, known as Laylat al-Qadr, is believed to be a night of exceptional blessings, during which the Quran was revealed to Prophet Muhammad. The first revelation of the Holy Quran took place on Laylat al-Qadr.

However, fasting does not mean abstaining only from food and water; it also necessarily includes refraining from all evil actions and thoughts. One must not indulge in falsehood, gossip, backbiting, or foul language while fasting.

Once, as Prophet Muhammad was passing through a street with his followers, he heard a woman shouting and abusing others. The Prophet asked, "Who is this woman? Is she a Muslim?" His followers replied, "She is a Muslim and is observing the fast." The Prophet then instructed his followers to offer dates to the woman to break her fast, explaining that by using vulgar language and expressing anger, she had rendered her fast meaningless.

In essence, a fasting person must exercise utmost control to eliminate even the slightest traces of wickedness in behavior and demeanor. The observer of a fast must ensure that their thoughts and deeds remain pure, noble, decent, and benevolent toward others, including all of humanity.

There are two types of sinners:

2. Fasiq-ul-Aqeeda - One who commits sin and does not believe it is wrong.

Fasting can refine and purify those in the first category. During Ramzan, believers are given the opportunity for repentance and forgiveness. If a person sincerely seeks pardon from the Lord for their misdeeds, the Lord listens to their prayers during this holy month.

The faithful are instructed to adopt taqwa (refraining from sin and guarding against evil). If those observing the fast do not adhere to this principle, their fast will not be accepted by Allah. As the Quran (79:40-41) states:

"As for him who fears to stand before his Lord and restrains himself from low desires, Paradise is surely the abode."

Fasting detoxifies the body when observed properly. Namaz (prayer), besides being an act of worship, is similar to yoga and meditation. Prophet Muhammad's daughter, Hazrat Fatima Zehra, highlighted the benefits of fasting during Ramzan, stating that one of its purposes is to help the rich understand the pangs of hunger experienced by the poor. For this reason, Zakaat (charitable almsgiving) is prescribed during this period.

The Quran states: "And spend in the way of Allah and cast not yourself to perdition with your own hand." It further clarifies: "He loves those who purify themselves." Someone once asked Hazrat Ali Ibn Abi Talib, the Caliph of Islam, "How do we know that Allah has accepted our prayers during Ramzan?" Hazrat Ali replied, "If, between the sighting of the moon at the beginning of Ramzan and the sighting of the moon for Eid, you notice a positive change in your behavior, your prayers have been accepted."

Similarly, in Hinduism, Chaitra Navratri is observed between April 2-11, while Sharad Navratri is celebrated in the autumn season, around October-November. According to the Shastras, devotees observing Navratri fasts must practice Brahmacharya (celibacy), as it helps in reducing negative qualities such as anger, pride, deceit, and greed.

It also aids in keeping and honoring different vows and commitments in life. Devotees observing the fast should also abstain from falsehood and refrain from using intoxicants like gutka, tobacco, and wine. Consumption of non-vegetarian meals is also prohibited during these periods.

Currently, the month-long Ramzan is being observed, and Chaitra Navratri will be celebrated from March 30 to April 7, 2025. From a cultural

perspective, Delhi has a unique character of celebration, as people from all corners of the country reside here.

The great Urdu poet, Mirza Ghalib, beautifully captured the fervor of the holy month of Ramzan in Delhi in a letter to his close friend, Mir Mehdi Husain 'Majroh':

"How did you presume that during the month of Ramzan, I would be staying in Rampur? Although Nawab Sahab insisted that I stay in Rampur, tempting me with mangoes, I left and, by 'Chand Raat' (the night before Ramzan), reached Delhi, for Delhi is a place where people feel the pulse of absolute bliss.

"In Delhi, during Ramzan, I have three commitments: At dawn, I go to Masjid Hamid Ali Khan, at Kashmiri Gate, to listen to the soulful recitation of the Holy Quran by Hazrat Qari Jafar Ali Jarchavi; in the evening, I break my fast at Mehtab Bagh, near Jama Masjid; and at night, I perform Namaz-e-Isha at Jama Masjid. How mirthfully life is passing here!"

Ramzan and Navratri, two sacred observances in Islam and Hinduism, exemplify the virtues of self-restraint, introspection, and spiritual elevation. Both are deeply rooted in religious traditions and serve as periods of reflection, discipline, and devotion, guiding individuals toward moral and ethical excellence.

## Spiritual fasting

Ramzan, the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, is a time for fasting, prayer, and increased charitable acts. It is believed that during this holy month, the first revelation of the Quran was bestowed upon Prophet Mohammad on Laylat al-Qadr, a night of immense blessings.

Fasting during Ramzan is not merely about abstaining from food and drink but also about refraining from falsehood, anger, and immoral behavior. The objective is to cultivate 'taqwa'—a heightened sense of God-consciousness and righteousness. Acts of charity, such as 'Zakaat' (alms-giving), further strengthen the bond of empathy between the rich and the poor.

Similarly, Navratri, a Hindu festival observed twice a year, emphasises devotion, purity, and self-discipline. Devotees engage in fasting, prayer, and abstinence from material indulgences, aiming to purify the mind and body. Observing celibacy and refraining from falsehood, intoxicants, and non-vegetarian food are integral to this practice.

In a culturally diverse city like Delhi, these spiritual occasions are observed with great fervor, reflecting the city's unique ethos of religious harmony. Ultimately, both Ramzan and Navratri remind us that true devotion lies in self-restraint, moral conduct, and a compassionate heart.

(The author is a lawyer. Views expressed are personal)



TUALIA  
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BANERJEE

ket has to open up. It can't just stay closed."

Meanwhile, back in India, the government is considering reducing import duties on certain products, including electronics. India currently imposes nearly 16.5 per cent import duties on several ICT hardware products, while the US maintains rates well below 1 per cent. Many experts believe that lowering duties on electronics could benefit India by encouraging US companies to shift their supply chains to the country. However, there seems to be some confusion over the definition of "US-manufactured" and "Made in the US" when determining tariff reductions. At present, many US technology companies do not manufacture in the US but operate their largest factories in China or Southeast Asia.

President Trump, meanwhile, is pressuring American companies to relocate their manufacturing bases back to the US, threatening consequences if they fail to do so. This move could further complicate the already fragile global supply chain. India is closely monitoring these developments and must remain agile in its decision-making.

## Conclusion

India and the United States have shared a complex yet evolving economic relationship, marked by cooperation and contention. Over the years, India has worked towards strengthening trade ties with the US, which remains one of its largest trading partners. However, friction has persisted over issues such as tariffs, market access, and trade imbalances. With the new US administration taking a firm stance on protectionist policies, India faces increasing pressure to lower its trade barriers and open its markets to American goods, particularly in agriculture and technology. President Trump's aggressive trade policies, including reciprocal tariffs and demands for reduced Indian duties on US imports, have added new challenges to negotiations.

As India navigates these complex trade dynamics, it must strike a balance between fostering economic cooperation with the US and protecting its domestic industries, especially agriculture and manufacturing. While a bilateral trade deal could provide long-term benefits, hasty concessions could threaten small businesses and farmers. At the same time, global supply chain shifts present opportunities for India to attract investments from US firms. With careful negotiations and strategic decision-making, India can work towards a trade agreement that ensures mutual benefit while safeguarding its economic interests. The coming months will be crucial in shaping the future of India-US economic relations.

(The writer is a political analyst. Views expressed are personal)

The Indian agriculture mar-

# Russia says it has retaken Kursk's biggest town from Ukraine



Ukrainian serviceman of Khartia brigade known by call sign "Krystal" fires M101 Howitzer towards Russian positions in Kharkiv region, Ukraine

PTI

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Moscow

Russian forces have driven the Ukrainian army out of the biggest town in Russia's Kursk border region, officials claimed Thursday, as US officials sought the Kremlin's response to a proposed 30-day ceasefire in the three-year war that Ukraine has endorsed.

The Russian Defence Ministry's claim that it recaptured the town of Sudzha, hours after President Vladimir Putin visited his commanders in Kursk and wore military fatigues, could not be independently verified. Ukrainian officials made no immediate comment on the claim.

The renewed Russian military push and Putin's high-profile visit to his troops came as US President Donald Trump presses for a diplomatic end to the war. The US Tuesday lifted its March 3 suspension of military aid for Kyiv after senior US and Ukrainian officials made progress on how to stop the fighting during talks held in Saudi Arabia.

Trump said Wednesday that "it's up to Russia now" as his administration presses Moscow to agree to the ceasefire. The US president has made veiled threats to hit Russia with new sanctions if it won't engage with peace efforts.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Thursday that US negotiators were on their way to Russia, but he wouldn't comment on Moscow's view of the ceasefire proposal.

"Before the talks start, and they haven't started yet, it would be wrong to talk about it in public," he told reporters.

Senior US officials say they hope to see Russia stop attacks on Ukraine within the next few days.

White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt told Fox News that national security adviser Mike Waltz spoke Wednesday with his Russian counterpart. She also confirmed that Trump's special envoy, Steve Witkoff, will head to Moscow for talks with Russian officials, possibly including Putin.

By signaling its openness to a ceasefire, Ukraine has presented the Kremlin with

a dilemma at a time when the Russian military has the upper hand in the war — whether to accept a truce and abandon hopes of making new gains, or reject the offer and risk derailing a cautious rapprochement with Washington.

The Ukrainian army's foothold inside Russia has been under intense pressure for months from a renewed effort by Russian forces, backed by North Korean troops. Ukraine's daring incursion last August led to the first occupation of Russian soil by foreign troops since World War II and embarrassed the Kremlin.

Speaking to commanders Wednesday, Putin said he expected the military "to completely free the Kursk region from the enemy in the nearest future."

Putin added that in the future "it's necessary to think about creating a security zone alongside the state border," in a signal that Moscow could try to expand its territorial gains by capturing parts of Ukraine's neighboring Sumy region. That idea could complicate a ceasefire deal.

Ukraine launched the raid in a bid to

counter the unceasingly glum news from the front line, as well as draw Russian troops away from the battlefield inside Ukraine and gain a bargaining chip in any peace talks. But the incursion didn't significantly change the dynamic of the war.

The Institute for the Study of War, a Washington-based think tank, assessed late Wednesday that Russian forces were in control of Sudzha.

Ukraine's top military head, Gen. Oleksandr Syrskiy, said late Wednesday that Russian aviation had carried out an unprecedented number of strikes on Kursk and that as a result Sudzha had been almost completely destroyed. He did not comment on whether Ukraine still controlled the settlement but said it was "maneuvering (troops) to more advantageous lines."

Meanwhile, Major General Dmytro Krasnylykov, commander of Ukraine's Northern Operational Command, which includes the Kursk region, was dismissed from his post, he told Ukrainian media outlet Suspilne on Wednesday.

# Imran Khan's party slammed for spreading 'fake narrative'

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Islamabad

Defence Minister Khawaja Asif on Thursday slammed jailed former premier Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party for spreading a "fake narrative" regarding the deadly terrorist attack on a train in Balochistan.

At least 21 passengers were killed in the attack by the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) terrorists on the Jaffar Express in Bolan areas of Balochistan on Tuesday. The stand-off with the militants ended after the security forces killed all 33 terrorists.

Speaking in the National Assembly, Asif accused PTI-affiliated social media accounts of misrepresenting the tragic incident and undermining national unity by promoting misinformation, instead of acknowledging the sacrifices made by the armed forces in the rescue operation.

"What's more upsetting is the way PTI's social media interpreted the situation," he said. "In yesterday's tweets, and otherwise as well, they target the armed forces. When the armed forces impose martial law, then they stand with them," Asif said, recalling that Khan supported Pervez Musharraf in his 2002 referendum.

Asif said Pakistan would emerge victorious in the war on terrorism with the nation's support for the armed forces.

"Our war against terrorism is a big milestone that the entire country can be proud of. If the entire nation stands proud like this with our armed forces, then there is no doubt we will be successful in our war (against terrorism)," the minister said.

The Parliament on Thursday unanimously passed a resolution to condemn the train attack and all acts of terrorism

that endanger people and public order.

Minister for Parliamentary Affairs Tariq Fazal Chaudhary moved the resolution that appreciated the armed forces for their unwavering commitment, bravery and sacrifice in safeguarding the lives of the citizens and protecting the integrity of Pakistan.

The House expressed the "resolve to take every possible measure to eliminate terrorism from every corner of the country, affirming that no group, individual and ideology that seeks to undermine the nation's security, prosperity and sovereignty will be allowed to spread fear, hatred and violence within the territorial limits of the country."

**At least 21 passengers were killed in the attack by the Balochistan Liberation Army terrorists on the Jaffar Express in Bolan areas of Balochistan on Tuesday**

It expressed the commitment to working relentlessly to root out terrorism in all its forms and manifestations.

The House called upon the people regardless of their ethnicity and religion to unite in the fight against terrorism and reject extremism, ensuring peace, safety and prosperity for future generations.

Chairman Pakistan People's Party Bilawal Bhutto Zardari strongly condemned the terrorist attack.

He said the terrorists, enjoying the backing of some foreign forces, only want to kill innocent people and impede the progress of Pakistan. He emphasized the need for unity in political ranks and consensus to once again defeat the terrorists.

# Maintenance hole explosion at Texas Tech University causes fire

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Texas

An explosion inside a maintenance hole on the Texas Tech University campus in Lubbock set off fires and power outages, leading school officials to issue evacuation orders for several buildings and cancel classes for the rest of the week, university police said.

The explosion happened Wednesday night at the Engineering Key section of campus, which was evacuated.

Power was being shut down to the entire campus while repairs were underway, said Caitlynn Jeffries, a spokesperson

for the university's police department. She asked that all public and unofficial personnel avoid campus.

"You can go ahead and go home for spring break. We are closing school down for the next couple days," Jeffries said at a news media briefing.

Firefighters responded to campus at about 7 p.m. For a possible gas leak, Lubbock Fire Rescue Capt. Jon Tunnell said at the briefing. They found "multiple manhole covers with active fire and smoke issuing from them," he said.

No injuries were reported, Tunnell said.

# Musk, DOGE may get rid of programme that made tax filing free

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Washington

Mia Francis, a 22-year-old barista from Boston, filed her taxes on her own this year for the first time, using a free government tax filing programme that made it easy because it did most of the work for her.

Francis said it took 45 minutes to finish her taxes with the IRS Direct File programme, an electronic tax return filing system that the IRS made permanent last year and that has rolled out to 25 states.

Francis is expecting a \$530 refund. And because she saved cash by not using a commercial tax preparation company to file her taxes, "that money will go a long way," she said. She plans to use it for a trip to Amsterdam this year.

Despite its popularity with Francis and other members of the American public, the IRS Direct File's fate remains unclear as Elon Musk and the Department of Government Efficiency cleave their way through the federal bureaucracy.

So far, the programme is still available for use ahead of the April 15 tax filing deadline, and Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent committed during his January confirmation hearing to maintaining it, at least for this tax season.

Representatives from the Internal Revenue Service and DOGE did not respond to requests for comment from The Associated Press on their plans for Direct File. But one Republican tax expert says the IRS never got congressional authorization to create Direct File.

And Republican lawmakers and commercial tax preparation firms complain the programme is a waste of money because free filing programs already exist, although they are hard to use.

Direct File was rolled out as a pilot program in 2024 after the IRS was tasked with looking into how to create a "direct file" system as part of the money it received from the Inflation Reduction Act signed into law by President Joe Biden in 2022. Last May, the agency announced that the programme would be made permanent.

The IRS accepted 140,803 returns filed by taxpayers using Direct File in the 12 states where it was available last tax season. It's been expanded to include half the country this year. It is unclear how many taxpayers have used Direct File this year.

Merici Vinton, an original architect of Direct File from the US Digital Service, noted the ease and accessibility of the programme and called it "a great example of how people should interact with the government in the 21st century."

"We effectively launched a startup in



the IRS," she said. "It was built by an in-house product team, in an iterative manner, and we ship updates to the software to improve user experience in real time based on feedback. If we continue to invest in it, both taxpayers and the IRS can benefit." Musk posted last month on his social media site that he had "deleted" 18F, a government agency that worked on technology projects such as the IRS' Direct File programme.

This led to some confusion about whether Direct File is still available to taxpayers. However, conversations inside the IRS indicate that no decision has been made on whether to cut the program, two people familiar with these conversations tell the AP.

Former IRS Commissioner Daniel Werfel, who oversaw the rollout of the programme, said Treasury officials considering the future of the program should take into account "the voice of the taxpayers."

"My reflection is that taxpayers are in very different situations and have very different preferences for how they want to file," he said. "Those whose preference is to file electronically direct with the IRS for free, it's a good option to have on the menu. But it should not replace other options."

Derrick Plummer, a spokesperson for Intuit, one of the country's largest commercial tax preparation firms, said free tax preparation had been available for years before Direct File came along.

"IRS Direct File is a solution in search of a problem, a waste of taxpayer dollars and a drain on critical IRS resources," he said. A June 2024 Treasury Inspector General for Tax Administration report estimates that the annual costs of Direct File may range from \$64 million to \$249 million.

"The IRS should focus on its core mission including data privacy and customer service while policymakers in Washington

focus on simplifying the tax code," Plummer said.

However, other taxpayers, like 31-year-old Aquiel Warner in Austin, Texas, say they want to avoid using commercial tax preparation software.

Warner filed her taxes with Direct File in 10 minutes using her phone and a chatbot that the IRS provides. She likes the program's convenience, that it prepopulated her tax forms and that it allowed for free filing. Although she has some concerns about data privacy in the government — DOGE is reported to have access to some of the IRS' internal systems — she feels more secure going through the IRS than commercial tax preparation services.

"I don't want to be a product. I don't want my information sold when I file my taxes," she said. "I have to file my taxes, and I don't want to be put in a situation where, in order to file my taxes, I have to pay to get the help I need because I'm not a professional tax preparer."

Grover Norquist, president of Americans for Tax Reform, said the IRS never got explicit permission from Congress to create the Direct File system.

"It really doesn't matter if it's a good idea. It was done illegally," he said, calling on Congress and the Justice Department to look into what he says is unauthorized spending that went into the creation of Direct File.

Democratic lawmakers in January asked Bessent and IRS commissioner nominee Billy Long to preserve the program. They wrote in a letter that "ending Direct File would hurt everyday Americans." Long has not yet received a nomination hearing.

In the meantime, Musk and his cadre of computer programmers could decide to wield their tech skills to boost the programme — or use the very same digital savvy to delete it.

# Pak PM Shehbaz Sharif visits Balochistan after BLA insurgents attack train



A special train, organised by the army for the wounded and survivors rescued by security forces from a passenger train attacked by insurgents, arrives at a railway station in Much, in Pakistan's southwestern Balochistan province

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Karachi

Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif on Thursday visited the restive Balochistan province to review the law and order situation and to express solidarity with the people there following the Jaffar Express hijacking incident in which 21 civilians and four soldiers were killed.

Sharif's visit comes a day after security forces killed all 33 Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) militants who on Tuesday hijacked the Jaffar Express.

Sharif is accompanied by Deputy Prime Minister Muhammad Ishaq Dar, Federal Minister for Information and Broadcasting Attaullah Tarar, Federal Minister for Planning, Development Ahsan Iqbal, Federal Minister for Science and Technology Nawabzada Mir Khalid Magsi and others.

The incident occurred when the train, travelling from Quetta to Peshawar and carrying 440 passengers, was ambushed by BLA militants near the mountainous terrain of Gudalar and Piru Kunri in a tunnel. They opened fire

on the train and held the passengers hostage, prompting the security forces to initiate an operation that lasted two days. Announcing the completion of the operation, Director General Inter-Services Public Relations Lieutenant General Ahmed Sharif Chaudhry on Wednesday said the armed forces took part in the action against militants who "remained in contact with their facilitators and mastermind based in Afghanistan via satellite phone". Units from the Pakistan Air Force (PAF), Special Services Group (SSG), Army, and Frontier Corps (FC) took part in the operation, the army's spokesperson said.

Chaudhary said no one can be permitted to make innocent people of Pakistan the victim of their barbarism in the streets, trains, buses or markets because of their misleading ideas and instructions and facilitation of foreign masters.

"Whoever does this, let me say it very clearly, will be hunted down and brought to justice. Let me also say that this incident of Jaffar Express changes the rules of the game," he said.

The bodies of those killed in the attack will be sent to their native areas after necessary administrative prerequisites. Defence Minister Khawaja Asif on Thursday lambasted former prime minister Imran Khan-led Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) for "politicising" the incident and misinterpreting the situation on social media.

"We need to rise above political interests and demonstrate national unity (on such occasions)," said Asif.

Asif slammed the former PTI-led government's decision to relocate thousands of fighters from the outlawed Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) to the country.

On the Jaffar Express rescue operation, the minister said, "God forbids, there could have been a lot of casualties, but the security forces eliminated the terrorists.

"Our war against terrorism is a big milestone that the entire country can be proud of. If the entire nation stands proud like this with our armed forces, then there is no doubt we will be successful in our war (against terrorism)," the minister asserted.



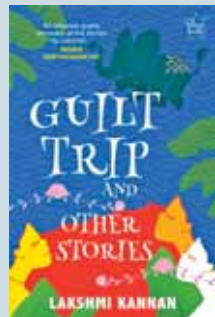




**MARCH READS**



Book: Phantom Lovers  
Author: Achala Moulik  
Publisher: Niyogi books  
Price: ₹595



Book: Guilt Trip and Other Stories  
Author: Lakshmi Kannan  
Publisher: Niyogi books  
Price: ₹395



Book: Quarterlife : A Novel  
Author: Devika Rege  
Publisher: HarperCollins  
Price: ₹599



Book: The Bandit Queens: A Novel  
Author: Parini Shroff  
Publisher: Harper Collins  
Price: ₹499

'Ratan Tata: A Life by Thomas Mathew,' offers a compelling tribute to India's legendary industrialist and philanthropist, says **KUMAR CHELLAPPAN**

## The Architect of India's Aspirations

The demise of an 87-year-old human being is neither shocking nor does it bring everlasting grief to the mind. If the deceased happens to be our father, mother, brother, or sister, we may be in a sense of bereavement for a couple of months. The general feeling among us is that each day that one gets after crossing the age of 60 is a bonus from Yama Raj. But there are certain persons for whom we pray to God Almighty to bless them with a much longer life. Ratan Tata, India's legendary industrialist topped the list of such people who made this world a much better place because of their presence.

The entire Indian society, barring a Malayalam satellite news channel, received the news of Ratan Tata's demise with a pang in their hearts. Born into a Zoroastrian family (popularly known as Parsees), Ratan Tata lived a life based exclusively on the essence of Zoroastrianism-Humata, Hukta, and Huvarsta (good thoughts, good words, and good deeds). For Ratan and the Tata Group, industry and business were means to serve humanity, either through philanthropy or social service. The catchphrase "We Also Make Steel" campaign launched by TISCO, the flagship company of the group, speaks volumes about the mission of this industrial conglomerate.

No doubt, the central government had honoured J.R.D. Tata and Ratan Tata with Bharat Ratna and Padma Vibhushan, respectively. But it is still doubtful whether the powers that be gave these great sons of India the honour they truly deserved. J.R.D. Tata, predecessor to Ratan

Tata, did all he could to elevate the country economically and socially, despite the outdated socialist ideology that prevailed from 1947 to 1991. He had been pleading with the policymakers to loosen the government's shackles over the economy, which would have made India competitive in the global arena.

It is said that for every industry launched by them, the Tata Group set up institutions like schools, colleges, vocational training institutes, hospitals, and old-age homes.

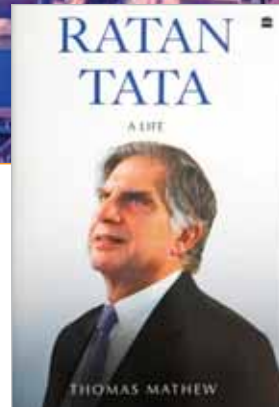
During the 1980s, I do remember watching J.R.D. Tata interviewing the then World Population Council chairman who visited India. It is rated as one of the best interviews in Indian television. Imagine the numero uno of our industry, who is held in awe by the world, appearing on Indian TV to interview a guest!

The second TV programme featuring J.R.D. Tata was also broadcast by Doordarshan-it was an interview by Rajiv Mehrotra in the famous series "In Conversation," a popular talk show. Interestingly, those were

the days when there were no satellite TV news channels and "angry young anchorpersons" who interrogated the interviewees instead of interviewing them.

There are exceptions, like "Rendezvous with Simi Garewal," in which the diva of Hindi cinema interviewed the crème de la crème of Indian society. They were all talk shows shot inside aesthetically designed studios and, hence, the series could not always capture the real person being interviewed. But with all due respect, it has to be said that Simi Garewal did a wonderful job. She successfully brought to our drawing rooms personalities like Ratan Tata (the first time I saw Ratan Tata appear on a TV show).

**Ratan Tata: A Life** authored by Thomas Mathew, a former IAS officer. I do not know whether there are any other books on Ratan Tata. The 666-page book is a moving tribute to Ratan, who was once described as the Most Eligible Bachelor of India. Ratan reached the zenith of Indian industries not just because he was born with the surname



**ABOUT THE BOOK**

Book: Ratan Tata: A Life  
Author: Thomas Mathew  
Publisher: HarperCollins  
Price: ₹1499/-



Ratan Tata receiving the Padma Vibhushan from the then President Pratibha Patil at the Civil Investiture-II Ceremony



Young Ratan Tata shares a heartfelt moment with his beloved dog, showcasing his lifelong bond with animals

## CAG ex-DG diagnosis malaise with Top Auditor

BY DEEPAK KUMAR JHA

Auditors most often cite the statement of B. R. Ambedkar that the **Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG)** of India is the most important official. Over the decades, the CAG emerged as India's highly respected institution. The people also look upon the CAG to keep a check on the executive by preparing no-holds-barred reports. P. Sesh Kumar spent decades in the office of the CAG. Hailing from the Indian Audit and Accounts Service (IAAS), Kumar gained a ringside view of the functioning of the CAG. He, thus, has expectations on him to reveal if the CAG is facing new challenges.

The CAG made a comeback to the popular discourse over tabling of reports in the Delhi Assembly. Else, the CAG had almost faded from the popular discourse in the recent years. Kumar examines sharp reduction in number of reports of the CAG since 2011. He notes that the CAG reports peaked in 2015 when a total of 52 reports were submitted on Union government. Afterwards, reports turned to trickle, coming down to just 15 in 2018. Kumar after retirement has come out with an inside account of the functioning of the CAG. His book 'CAG Ensuring Accountability Amidst Controversies: An Inside View' deals with several turning points in the journey of the top auditor of India. The book also dwells upon the tenure of Vinod Rai and takes a critical view of the famous "presumptive losses to the exchequer" shown in the reports during the last few years of the Manmohan Singh-led UPA government. Kumar indeed also cites the gains made by the government with the course corrections in policy making after the CAG reports were made public.

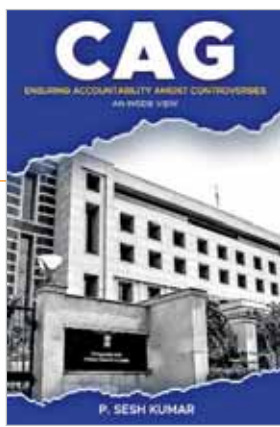
In 17 chapters, Kumar's book gives an exhaustive account of the history, current controversies, challenges, and also a reform roadmap. The book critically examines the tenures of Rajiv Mehrishi and GC Murmu as CAG. The author also brings out concerns in the IAAS cadre over the manner in which some of the CAG reports were handled. He details unhappiness in the cadre of auditors over the manner in which the report on the collections of tolls on national highways were handled by the CAG. Kumar stresses that the CAG report on the collections of tolls on national highways listed timely reform roadmap also for policy actions by the government.

But the people are genuinely concerned over the CAG not going public with its reports. Kumar answers the people's curiosity by examining in details the Supreme Court judgment that termed the CAG reports as "mere views" until they are tabled by Public Accounts Committee (PAC) of parliament or Assemblies. This explains why the CAG is not going public with reports after submitting them to parliament or Assemblies.

Taking a ringside view, the book argues that the CAG is not mandated to be a property of the PAC that its reports can wait endlessly to go public. The CAG is accountable to the people, and, therefore, the top auditor should move to the Supreme Court to review the judgment. Kumar details that almost half the reports of the CAG are awaiting action on the parts of the PAC of parliament and Assemblies for the people to know about them. If the CAG reports are not made public, the Constitution's arrangements of checks and balances for the healthy functioning of democracy too gets affected, suggests the book. It argues that the people need to know about the CAG reports to make informed decisions.

Besides, Kumar also raises a pertinent question on the appointment of the CAG. A single member CAG may be susceptible to personal biases, he argues, while suggesting that a multi-member top auditor body should be constituted. Kumar calls for Constitutional changes so that an appointment committee on the lines of the Election Commission and the Director of the CBI can also decide the members of the CAG. Kumar revisits some of the major controversies over the CAG reports. The CAG report on Bofors Scam in 1989 sets the backdrop for the political slugfest in the PAC in not recommending actions on the report to parliament. The book also exhaustively dwells upon the CAG reports on 2G spectrum allocations, Coal blocks, Rafale deal, and many others.

Kumar's book, published by White Falcon Publishing, is a complete account of the functioning of the CAG, while also seeking space as a historical document. Until 1978, CAG was appointed from among IAS and IAAS, writes Kumar in the book, while making a case for reopening the post for non-IAS officials also. The book makes for an interesting read while also being an important document on the functioning of the CAG.



**ABOUT THE BOOK**

Book: CAG  
Author: P. SESH KUMAR  
Publisher: White Falcon Publishing  
Price: ₹799/-

HOW SOCIAL MEDIA SHAPES CONVERSATIONS

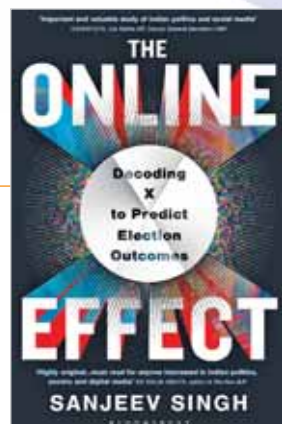
## The New Ballot Box?

BY SHALEEN KUMAR SINGH

In **The Online Effect**, Sanjeev Singh, a seasoned journalist and academic, delves into the intricate relationship between social media and political communication in India, offering a compelling narrative that is both scholarly and accessible. With a sharp analytical focus on X (Formerly Twitter) influence on electoral outcomes, Singh presents the fascinating story of the Singh-Srivastava Vote Predictor (SSVP) model, a groundbreaking tool he co-developed with data scientist Rishabh Srivastava. The preface sets the stage with a personal anecdote, recounting Singh's early encounters with X and its transformative potential. The book meticulously examines how X evolved from a microblogging site into a critical tool for political communication.

A significant portion of the book is dedicated to the development of the SSVP model, a pioneering effort to correlate X engagement metrics—such as tweets, retweets, likes, and interactions—with electoral outcomes. Sanjeev Singh provides a detailed account of the challenges involved, from navigating the complexities of data collection via X APIs to employing advanced statistical analyses and rigorous testing to validate the model.

The study's findings are striking—in six out of seven states analysed, there was a strong correlation between X engagement and vote share. He emphasises the shrinking digital divide between rural and urban India, highlighting the model's relevance across diverse demographics. He also critiques traditional sentiment analysis methods, advocating for a



**ABOUT THE BOOK**

Book: The Online Effect  
Author: Sanjeev Singh  
Publisher: Bloomsbury India (2024)  
Price: ₹479/-

more nuanced approach to studying political communication in the digital age.

Despite the technical nature of the subject, Sanjeev Singh's engaging and conversational tone makes complex concepts accessible to both academics and general readers. The book is enriched with empirical data, case studies, and real-world examples, offering a comprehensive exploration of X impact on Indian politics. By weaving together insights from journalism, political science, and data analytics, he provides a holistic understanding of the digital transformation in electoral campaigns. As India approaches

its next general election, the book serves as a practical guide for psephologists, political strategists, and voters alike, offering tools to navigate the evolving landscape of digital political communication. The book also prompts deeper reflection on the ethical implications of using social media data for electoral predictions. While author briefly touches on the limitations of sentiment analysis, he does not fully address pressing concerns about data privacy, misinformation, and algorithmic biases.

*The Online Effect* is a thought-provoking and timely exploration of how X has transformed Indian politics. By demystifying the SSVP model, the author offers valuable insights into the intersection of technology, communication, and democracy. The book is an essential read for scholars, journalists, and anyone interested in the digital future of electoral politics.

Shaleen Kumar Singh teaches English at Swami Shukdevanand College, Shahjahanpur, India, edits creativesaplings.in an online journal.

